

## **Sometimes a Good Idea Takes Time to Develop – Employers Encouraging Employers to Give People with Disabilities a Fair Chance in Sri Lanka**

### **The Challenge**

In 1994, an international donor supporting a job placement service in Sri Lanka shifted its funding emphasis to other activities for people with disabilities. At the same time, a school for special needs students and a prosthetics and orthotics workshop made independent appeals to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in Colombo for a consultant. Both the school and the workshop wanted assistance in, first, studying Sri Lanka's employment situation and, second, formulating recommendations about how best to move their students and clients into employment. The consultant suggested involving businesspeople to lend a hand. It was an idea that worked well in other countries and could easily be replicated in Sri Lanka. Finding interested businesspeople willing to work with the Government and NGOs was not a problem, and everyone was initially enthusiastic.

The businesspeople met as a loosely organized group, along with NGOs and the Government, to discuss how they could contribute to the employment effort. But after the first year, the group fell apart. Even though the notion of moving people with disabilities into employment was a good idea and the businesspeople were willing to help, something was missing from the alliance. The group seemed to lack the proper "glue" to keep it focused and cohesive.

### **Meeting the Challenge**

In 1999, the Government of Sri Lanka and the Japanese Association for the Employment of Disabled Persons (JAED) sponsored a seminar on employment and training. Inspired by the seminar's message, the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC) came forward and offered to lead the effort to encourage the employment of people with disabilities. Several EFC members, including CEI Plastics (see box), had been hiring disabled workers for years. They knew that people with disabilities could deliver in the workplace. An established employers' organization with available resources committed to creating job opportunities for disabled people became the much-needed "glue" that was missing in 1994.

The Employers' Federation of Ceylon, with funding from the ILO, developed the Employers' Network on Disability, which it officially launched in 2000. Still evolving, the network is at the heart of a renewed effort to address the employment needs of people with disabilities. It is a powerful link between NGOs, vocational training programmes, the Government, employers and people with disabilities.

**The Good Practice:** An employers' association champions the working rights of people with disabilities by supporting an employers' network on disability.



### • Background •

The Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC) is the largest employers' forum in Sri Lanka. Its membership of 457 companies represents an employee base of about 350,000 people. Formed in 1929, it was the first organization to register as a trade union in Sri Lanka. (Sri Lanka's trade union ordinance recognizes any association of workers or employers.) A permanent secretariat provides services such as handling labour law and industrial relations matters on behalf of member firms, addressing concerns about occupational health and safety and workers' compensation and educating members about other issues related to human resources.

Since its creation, the EFC has committed itself to strengthening Sri Lanka's business environment. According to Director General Gotabaya Dasanayaka, the EFC believes that business strength is built on the labour contribution of all people. "It has been said more than once by national leaders," says Mr. Dasanayaka, "that in the development goal, the first priority is employment. The second priority is employment. And the third priority is employment. In that context, it's essential that we bring into the productive labour force all sectors, including those who are considered to be marginalized. I would say that is one of our biggest challenges." With an overall vision statement to "Promote social harmony through productive employment," the federation is implementing several proactive measures to encourage its members to hire people with disabilities.

## • The Evolving Employers' Network on Disability •

The Employers' Network on Disability is a work in progress. Like a pioneering business venture, it started as a good idea, set forth goals and a course of action and went forward. Also like a successful business, it reassesses its progress and operating environment, changing course as needed to take advantage of new opportunities or reassessing its direction when actions fail to deliver desired results. The following is the story of how the network developed – and the twists and turns it has taken thus far.

**Getting started.** Although it is a trailblazer, the Employers' Network on Disability is not without a role model. In 1999, the ILO sent EFC Industrial Relations Specialist Meghamalie Aluwihare and EFC member Anver Dole of CEI Plastics to study the Employers' Forum on Disability (EFD) in the United Kingdom. The British forum is an employer-funded and -managed membership organization focused on the issue of disability in the workplace. With more than 375 members, including an impressive list of corporations employing more than 20 per cent of the UK workforce, the forum is recognized as the authoritative voice on disability as it affects employers and service providers. It has achieved significant progress toward building positive employer awareness of and creating direct employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The EFD is a major proponent of the case for hiring disabled workers and attests to the bottom-line advantages of a disability-diverse workforce. While the forum proved to be a valuable model, the EFC found that it had to adapt rather than adopt its approaches.

**The Steering Committee.** As a direct result of the study tour, in 2000 EFC's director general organized a 15-member Steering Committee to establish the Sri Lanka version of the UK Employers' Forum on Disability. Representing the hotel, plantation, manufacturing and banking sectors, the committee became the basis of the Employers' Network on Disability. Its members decided that, as a first priority, the network needed to find out what employers were thinking and then promote the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. "Most employers have phobias" about people with disabilities, says Mr. Dole, also chair of the Network Steering Committee. "But once there are people with disabilities working who are capable, the phobias will quietly disappear."

The Steering Committee began to plan for its first awareness-raising activity – a national workshop that would bring together leaders from the top companies with other stakeholders and serve as the official launch of the Sri Lankan Employers' Network on Disability.

**The official launch and employers' seminar.** In May 2001 and to much fanfare, the EFC, again with assistance from the ILO, launched the network and conducted the workshop. In attendance were the executive director of the UK Employers' Forum on Disability and officials and representatives of the ILO, representatives of the Ministry of Social Services and other government agencies, NGOs, people with disabilities and their

advocates and more than 50 employers representing Sri Lanka's major businesses and industries. The high level of participation provided considerable opportunity for discussion and feedback. Employers were interested but needed to know more. Who are the job seekers? What are their skills and abilities? How can they be located? The answers were not immediately evident.

At that time, Sri Lanka lacked a strong government-operated employment service, even for the population at large. Also, the Government had yet to create a replacement service to succeed the job placement programme for people with disabilities that terminated in 1994. The Ministry of Social Services began to amass a database but was stalled by a lack of personnel and other constraints. The Ministry's field workers, some of them well trained, were unable to provide much-needed services on a large scale.

As hoped, the employers' seminar ended with recommendations directing the network's immediate work plan. At the same time, publicity in both the national and international media brought the disability issue to the attention of public awareness.

**Implementing the course of action.** To address the identified needs, the EFC contracted a consultancy firm to help carry out the following course of action:

- Examine and report on the current status of people with disabilities in the workplace;
- Study the needs of the private sector for trained workers as compared to those possessed by job seekers with disabilities;
- Develop a computerized database of job seekers with disabilities according to their skills, training needs and other parameters for access by employers interested in hiring; and
- Create a Web site that includes this database so that employers can access job seekers with disabilities.

Working collaboratively with the Ministry of Social Services to gather data about vocational training graduates and other job seekers listed with the Ministry's local offices and compiling employment advertisements in the newspaper, the consultancy firm was overwhelmed with responses. By May 2002, when the network organized a meeting to launch its Web site, the database contained more than 1,200 job seekers with disabilities, with more than 4,000 names still awaiting input.

Simultaneously, the consultancy firm worked with the EFC to conduct a survey of its members to learn about hiring rates and the types of jobs in which disabled persons were employed and to identify examples of good practice. Twenty-five percent of the 100 survey respondents (of 457 members) reported that they had hired a total of 179 people with disabilities.

In anticipation of increased hiring, Mrs. Aluwihare, the staff member in charge of the network, met with NGOs and government officials who work with people with disabilities to identify resources to support employers who may need technical or other assistance when they hire a disabled worker. The EFC learned about the value of such associations after hiring a top-notch employee referred by the Sri Lanka Federation of the Visually Handicapped. To assist her in her new position as the EFC's receptionist, the Sri Lankan Council for the Blind donated voice-activated assistive software so the employee could operate the computer needed for her job.

Thinking its work completed, at least for the time being, the network promoted its Web site and encouraged employers to hire workers with disabilities. The monthly EFC newsletter, for example, included (and still includes) a section on the Employers' Network and its activities. With information from the database and survey, the newsletter also featured a "Job Candidates Corner" that provided details of disabled job seekers and "Best Practices" to describe exemplary employer actions and policies with regard to disability. But the information in the newsletter did not seem to lead to new hirings. The Steering Committee was stumped about what to do next. Perhaps, members wondered, it was time for another awareness seminar.

**Revising the course of action.** The EFC requested ILO assistance. Together, the EFC and the ILO went directly to employers to get answers. The responses were consistent: If the network wanted to see more direct hiring of people with disabilities, it would need to adopt a more proactive approach that made hiring easier. Given that the network was not prepared to engage a placement officer as yet, the individual job placement approach was not feasible. In response, the ILO suggested a job fair to bring disabled job seekers, screened according to employer needs and trained in job searching, together with the many employers who expressed an interest in hiring people with disabilities. However, the EFC still needed expert assistance. It found it in an agency called Motivation and through the Ministry of Social Services.



Motivation is a UK-based NGO that receives USAID funding in Sri Lanka for coordinating the services of other disability NGOs to improve their delivery system. While Motivation's mandate under its grant agreement with USAID calls for fostering the training and employment of people with disabilities, that aspect of its work is not scheduled to begin for several years. Nonetheless, Motivation saw a good opportunity to work with the network and committed itself to the immediate project. At the same time, the Ministry of Social Services agreed to provide a field worker trained in assessment and job placement techniques to work with the initiative on a part-time basis. The ILO provided guidance and technical assistance, including job-searching skills materials (*Getting Hired: A Guide for Job Seekers Who Face Barriers to Employment* and its companion curriculum guide).

**The job fair.** From November 2002 to July 2003, when the job fair took place, Motivation, working with Ministry staff, further organized the database, selected and interviewed job seekers and provided training in effective job-seeking techniques. The Employers' Network drew from its members to assist with training in job-searching skills and to provide mock interviews so that participants could practise their skills in realistic settings. By the time the job fair took place, the job seekers were primed, and some recruiters already had their eyes on candidates they met during the practice interviews. Seventy-five people with disabilities, representing all disability groups, participated in the job fair.

The network sponsored a day-long event that began with a half-day awareness programme entitled "Promoting the Employment of People with Disabilities". Attended by more than 125 people, the event included presentations with follow-up discussions on interviewing, hiring and managing workers with disabilities. During the formal programme for employers, the job seekers practised their interview skills. The job fair took place in the afternoon, with 22 employers participating. Among the many companies were Sri Lankan Airlines, the John Keels Group, MAS Holdings (a company that also belongs to the Employers' Forum on Disability in the UK) and major hotels. Fourteen people were hired at the job fair, and many others were called for a second interview. A total of 44 people with disabilities, more than half of those who participated, ultimately found jobs.

Some employers expressed disappointment at not being able to hire the candidate of their choice. All the job seekers that spoke at the day's end expressed appreciation for the Employers' Network and its partners for organizing the event. Said one participant, "I was extremely impressed with the business community who, instead of sympathizing with disabled persons, recognized our skills and abilities. I am grateful to your organization for the efforts made toward giving us this opportunity."

Other notable moments included the attendance of the Minister of Labour, who conducted two television interviews from the fair, and the participation of the Additional Secretary from the Ministry of Social Services, who pledged to approach the Ministry of Finance for resources to support on-the-job training.

The job fair also generated several subsequent job orders and offers to train people with disabilities. For example, on the day following the job fair, one employer requested 50 women to work on a sewing project on a temporary basis. Others wanted to make donations so that people with disabilities could gain access to high-demand skills training.

**A collaborative model.** With the success of the job fair, all the collaborators committed to a more permanent working relationship. Motivation will upgrade and maintain the database and Web site (many employers reported the system was not user-friendly), continue screening and training job seekers and collaborate with NGOs for support services to help people with disabilities secure and retain jobs. It will also field hiring requests from EFC members by matching people with disabilities to job orders. The Ministry of Social Services will loan a trained placement officer to assist with network activities, especially the conduct of worksite visits and follow-up with disabled workers placed in employment. The EFC and its Employer's Network on Disability will dispatch the Ministry's placement officer to handle requests from members for job seekers or follow-up assistance. The organizations will also continue to seek out member support to assist with training in job-seeking skills and continue to encourage employer participation in the training and employment of people with disabilities.

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## Accomplishments

As one of the rare examples of an employers' organization taking proactive measures to improve the employment outlook for people with disabilities, the EFC's Employers' Network on Disability represents a major achievement. It has established the foundation for a collaborative model that is not only changing attitudes but also starting to show direct results in terms of the hiring of people with disabilities. Some of the network's specific accomplishments include:

With regard to promoting favourable awareness,

- Raising the profile of workers with disabilities throughout the country through its newsletter, seminars and the considerable media coverage of its activities.
- Participating in the filming of the ILO *AbilityAsia* video, which features interviews with employers, employees with disabilities and employment experts throughout the region. Several EFC members allowed the camera crew into their workplace and spoke of the strengths of their employees with disabilities.

- Participating in regional events to promote employer involvement in efforts to promote the rights and hiring of workers with disabilities. Representatives of the network, for example, attended the high-level intergovernmental meeting in Otzu, Japan, to evaluate the end of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons, 1993-2002.

With regard to promoting positive change and services,

- Providing input into government policies and supporting and strengthening the Government's initiatives related to employment and inclusion of people with disabilities.
- Engaging other NGOs and donors in the network to foster increased employment opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Developing a collaborative model for serving people with disabilities and its employer members.

With regard to promoting direct employment of people with disabilities,

- Sponsoring research on the hiring practices and current employment situation related to people with disabilities in Sri Lanka.
- Mobilizing interest among at least 50 network members to hire or train people with disabilities.
- Developing a database and Web site.
- Advocating for government-sponsored salary supplements for trainees with disabilities who learn on the job.
- Realizing the direct hiring of 44 people with disabilities through the network's first job fair and an unknown number through awareness-raising activities.



## A Model Employer in Sri Lanka

CEI Plastics is a private company that manufactures plastic moulded products for industry. The factory is located about 30 kilometres outside the capital, Colombo, in a semi-urban area. It has recruited people from nearby communities to work in its 24-hour shift system. Forty people with disabilities are employed in the workshop, stores, injection-moulding packing line and blow-moulding packaging section and as general workers who are required to move around among different tasks in the factory. Employees include both men and women; 19 have partial sight, 10 have no sight, 8 have mobility problems, 2 communicate with sign language and 1 has an intellectual disability.

A young man who uses a wheelchair and is skilled in motor winding is employed in the workshop, which is located on the ground floor. The only needed adaptations have been the construction of three ramps to replace a few steps and the widening of the toilet room door.

Another 14 people with disabilities, all women, have worked in the factory at some time but left after marrying. Some of them, however, started self-employment activities in their homes. One woman began making soap, for instance, and CEI purchases all its soap from her.

The disabled workers are distributed throughout the factory and are not confined to a particular section or activity. While they are visible because of their disability, they are at the same time difficult to locate because they have integrated so well with their nondisabled colleagues.

According to CEI Manager Anver Dole, disabled workers are eager to learn, easy to teach and generally more conscientious than their nondisabled peers. The Employers' Network on Disability uses CEI Plastics as a role model to demonstrate that the productivity of people with disabilities is equal to, and sometimes exceeds, that of other employees. Absenteeism, costs and other problems have never been an issue in the employment of disabled workers, says Mr. Dole. "Their production is often way above the average," he adds. "And they interact very well with other employees." CEI is looking to hire more people with disabilities, adds Mr. Dole.



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**Lessons Learned**

While the Employers' Federation of Ceylon is an established organization, it was and still is new to the issue of integrating people with disabilities into the workforce, but it is committed to supporting the network and learning how to be of greatest benefit. Lessons learned so far include the following:

**Awareness building is not enough.** The EFC realized that it had to develop both a knowledge base and community linkages as well as provide “value-added” services beyond the database. Obviously, employers are busy and – without assistance, incentives or encouragement – most are not likely to take the extra effort that might be required in hiring a worker with a disability.

**Practise what you preach.** In 2001, the EFC set itself as an example to other employers when it hired a woman with a visual impairment as its receptionist and secured the appropriate assistive technology to enable her to perform her job duties. “She is one of the best receptionists we have ever had here and has made a real difference in the first impression made to callers,” says the EFC director general. As a result, the EFC has enhanced its credibility with its members when encouraging them to hire workers with disabilities.

**There is strength in collaboration.** The network is learning about the importance of developing partnerships and relationships with the government agencies and NGOs that offer human, information and institutional resources.

**Human resources are critical.** The network is a special project of the EFC and has operated for more than two years with a small (US\$15,000) grant from the ILO. Establishment of the network would not have been possible without the EFC paying the salary of a part-time employee who serves as the network's secretary, and without the considerable human resource contributions of the Government, NGO partners and businesspeople.

**People with disabilities should be involved.** The Steering Committee includes a person with a disability who represents the major umbrella organization of people with disabilities in Sri Lanka. People with disabilities are included in network activities as job-search instructors, seminar presenters and advisors.

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## Looking Forward

The Employers' Network on Disability has formulated many plans for continuing its activities. Primarily, it looks to solidify its working relationship with its partners and to assess the impact of their respective roles and responsibilities. Through this mechanism, it will offer individual job placement and follow-up services in response to requests from Colombo-based employers.

It will also sponsor job fairs at the district level in collaboration with its existing partners and the newly formed Ministry of Labour's JobLink programme, an employment service for the general population. The Employers' Network will also establish a fund to accommodate offers from companies that wish to donate funds to sponsor people with disabilities for education and training.

Finally, recognizing that the network cannot continue to expand the project with its limited human resources and capital, even with the considerable contributions of its partners, it will seek to raise funds to cover the salary of a full-time professional to coordinate all its activities.

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## Replication

Any employers' organization can replicate the EFC initiative, but the success of such an initiative requires sustained commitment in terms of human and financial resources. An employers' organization interested in developing a similar network could link with government agencies, NGOs and with disabled persons to learn about disability issues. The interest of an established employers' association will be most welcome to the ILO, disabled people's organizations and other NGOs promoting the employment of people with disabilities. Such an association makes for a solid base of operation and an immediate group from which to draw experiences and develop relationships.

A network of employers concerned about improving the situation for workers with disabilities needs the commitment of its members. It is essential at the outset to survey the employers' organization to identify those people willing to give of their time and provide opportunities for people with disabilities and then form a small group to become familiar with the issues. Members, people with disabilities and employment experts should provide the necessary direction.

For More Information

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