

(Kegalle, Sri Lanka) Puspakumara turns on the light and positions his wheelchair in front of a workbench at his electronics repair shop. Television monitors and mobile phones are carefully laid out on the bench as Puspakumara gets down to work.

This young entrepreneur is the beneficiary of a mentoring programme set up by the local Chamber of Commerce and the ILO Youth Employment Project (ILO/Japan). His technical skills clearly outweigh any disadvantages of impaired mobility, and only two months after the official opening of his shop, Puspakumara says he is satisfied with his achievements so far.

Every morning, he makes his own way to work through the streets of this inland Sri Lankan town, some 80 kilometers from the capital Colombo. Neighbouring shop keepers assist him to open and close the shutters at the beginning and end of each workday and, with the help of a friend, he regularly goes to town to buy spare parts. But otherwise, Puspakumara is running his own business and making his own way in the world.

When asked about the major challenges he faces today in carrying on and expanding his business, Puspakumara surprisingly answers: "No particular challenges, apart from those caused by having too big a social network! If too many of your customers are also your friends, then raising prices and denying credit can become serious issues!"

Puspakumara lost the use of one arm and both legs when he was just a year old and following a difficult spinal operation. At the age of 8 he left his parents to live in a home for persons with disabilities and after completing 10 years of formal studies, he enrolled in a special technical school, also for persons with disabilities. It was there that Puspakumara learned how to repair electrical appliances and later gained hands-on experience fixing the TV sets of friends and neighbours. After one attempt to run his own business Puspakumara was forced to return to the home for people with disabilities after the landlord of his shop revoked the lease.

About a year later, his luck changed during a chance encounter with one of the mentors from the Chamber of Commerce who used to donate meals to people living at the house. The mentor, struck by the determination, experience and technical skills, easily identified the potential of this young entrepreneur. A few weeks later, Puspakumara had prepared a business plan and successfully received a 35,000 SLR loan (300 USD), topped up by a grant from the house for disabled people where he stays.

He was back in business.

Since then, the mentoring programme has also helped Puspakumara improve his managerial skills by securing a place for him in a Chamber of Commerce training course on bookkeeping. If the ingredients for a successful business are technical skills, business skills, micro-finance and social network, this young entrepreneur has successfully mastered all.

Today, Puspakumara's business is thriving and the continuous flow of customers through his shop leaves little doubt about the quality of his work.

To learn more about the Youth Employment Project (ILO/Japan), go to the [Asia Pacific Youth Net \(APYN\)](#)