

On Monday, 11 June 2012 the ILO's Bureau for Employers' Activities held a special session to bring awareness to the ILO Global Business and Disability Network and the business case for hiring people with disabilities as part of the International Labour Conference.

Disabled people constitute the world's largest minority group, representing 15 per cent of the population, or an estimated one billion people. At least 785 million of them are of working age.

The session brought together experts representing businesses and employer groups who helped make the "business case" for hiring and retaining disabled people. The "business case" argues that hiring a qualified person with a disability brings greater benefits beyond just filling an open job. People with disabilities can contribute to a company's overall competitiveness through benefits such as increased productivity, greater market share and lower job turnover rates.

Jean-Christophe Deslarzes, Executive Director of Human Resources and Organisation, Carrefour, offered a strong endorsement for including people with disabilities in his company's workplace: "developing an inclusive workforce will create shareholder value since, at the end of the day, the revenue drive comes from the employees who work for us."

Many employers are sharing their good practices on implementing inclusion strategies through the ILO Global and Business Disability Network, or the Network. Javier Constante, Commercial Vice President of Performance Plastics Europe, Middle East and Africa, Dow Chemical, stated that one of the reasons behind Dow Chemical's joining the Network was because "we wanted to find successes and show our successes in building a business case for hiring people with disabilities".

The Network includes some 43 multinational companies and 17 employers' organizations globally, as well as disabled persons groups such as the International Disability Alliance. It aims to help its members share knowledge and identify good practices; develop products and services that facilitate hiring and retention of disabled people; strengthen technical expertise on disability issues; and, link members to ILO activities and partners at the national level and through their local offices and supply chains.

Stefan Tromel of the International Disability Alliance noted the timeliness of the Network in light of the more than 112 countries that have now ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – a comprehensive human rights convention for people with disabilities – and the important role companies play in sharing the business case with each other.

Commenting on the broad range of tools and resources made available to all members of the Network, Valerie Guertler-Doyle, Head of Diversity Inclusion, Novartis said the publication of company practices was "a goldmine of ideas" in helping her develop a corporate disability diversity strategy". Ronnie Goldberg, Executive Vice President and Senior Policy Officer, US Council for International Business (USCIB), commented that USCIB's decision to join the Network was a result of interests from its member companies, including Dow Chemical. Dow Chemical's Javier Constante said, "by being a member of the Network, we can benefit from best practices by copying and pasting examples of others rather than reinventing the wheel". Ravi Peiris, Director General, Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC), added that the network provides a platform to show credibility to EFC member companies that they can make direct contributions to hiring untapped talent and increasing labour force productivity.

Sandra Polaski, Executive Director of Social Dialogue Sector also commented on the Network from an economic perspective, “the Network brings together labour supply and labour demand needs in a constructive dialogue and innovative way to give value added to people with disabilities and forward looking businesses”.

The event also marked major milestones in the development of the Network: a formal membership agreement, a strategic plan, and an active Steering Committee whose members includes Accor Hotels, Adecco, Carrefour, Casino Group, Dow Chemical, Infosys, MphasiS, Novartis and Standard Bank, US Council for International Business and the International Disability Alliance.

The session was attended by more than 100 people, including employers' representatives, business leaders and ILO staff. As well as raising awareness on companies that have successfully integrated disabled workers into their workplaces and business activities, the session provided an opportunity for several employers' organizations and at least one major conglomerate plans to join the Network.

For more information about the Network: www.businessanddisability.org, or write to businessanddisability@ilo.org