

International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2014 Sustainable Development: The Promise of Technology

For people with disabilities who are of working age, the rapid progress in information and communications technology (ICT) and assistive technology offer ever-increasing opportunities to participate in the world of work.

The estimated 1 billion people with disabilities worldwide represent some 15 per cent of the global population and are at higher risk of poverty than others. People with disabilities find it difficult to get jobs because of the inaccessibility of buildings, public transport, information and mistaken assumptions about their capacity to work. In all countries, unemployment among women and men with disabilities is higher than those for persons without disabilities. In OECD countries, for example, the unemployment rate reported for people with disabilities was 14 per cent compared to 7 per cent among non-disabled people. And, significantly, almost half of those with disabilities are outside of the active labour market and reliant on benefits, family support or charity. Increasingly, technology holds the promise to contribute to the development of disabled persons as well as their economic independence and, in the process, promotes inclusive societies and sustainable development.

What is the promise of technology?

While technological change has led to automation of tasks that were previously carried out on a labour intensive basis, and some have lost their jobs as a result, it has been on the whole positive for people with disabilities - particularly in information technology and assistive devices that enable them to live more independently than in the past. The development of information technology has also enabled women and men with disabilities to work with the kind of flexibility they require. Telework and Distance Learning options have now opened up, offering people with limited mobility the possibility of working and training from home or in a central location. New

technologies can enable workers with disabilities to be competitive in the labour market, and enable those who were economically inactive in the past to enter the labour market and earn a living.

How new technologies create work for people with disabilities

Directly, high-tech advances are starting to level the playing field for people with disabilities, opening doors by changing the ways they can find jobs. For example, computer screen readers can enable persons with visual impairments to access job vacancies. People with motor disabilities can use assistive technologies such as special keyboards or eye-tracking software.

Other new technologies replacing physical activity with automated production of goods or performance of demanding tasks have opened up many employment opportunities for women and men with disabilities. And other new assistive devices help people with disabilities perform jobs that were previously out of reach.

Indirectly, assistive devices also include those which facilitate the disabled person's getting ready for and travelling to and from work: adapted cars, and powerful, lightweight wheel chairs.

What is needed to realize the potential of technology to promote sustainable development?

Active labour market measures that promote the adoption of these technologies can improve the standard of living of people with disabilities and promote the inclusiveness of the labour market and increase the supply of labour for society as a whole. Measures are also needed to ensure that women and men with disabilities have equal access to reliable ICT services. In developing countries in particular, this requires creativity and innovation of the part of policy makers, since the

ICT infrastructure may not be in place or sufficiently reliable. The use of mobile telephony is being applied to good effect in some countries to overcome these issues.

Nevertheless, as highlighted in the ILO World Employment Report on Life in the Information Economy (2001), the digital divide between developing and higher income countries, and different population groups within individual countries, poses a major challenge to realizing the promise of technology for people with disabilities. A 2013 report by the Global Initiative for Inclusive ICTs (G3ict) on measuring progress based on ICT accessibility in compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) showed a deficit in making essential services accessible to persons with disabilities in countries that have ratified CRPD. The ILO participates in this global initiative to facilitate and support the implementation of the dispositions of the CRPD on accessibility of ICTs and assistive technologies. Thus, unless we can find ways to reduce the digital divide, the potential of technology to promote sustainable development for women and men with disabilities will remain out of reach.

ILO action

Since its early years, the ILO has been promoting equal training and employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Over the past decades, the ILO has put increased attention on promoting the use of technologies, knowledge sharing and measures to create work environments that are open, inclusive and accessible. This helps persons with disabilities participate more fully in, and contribute to, the world of work.

Knowledge sharing – research

At the start of the ICT revolution, the ILO commissioned a study on the role of new technology to potentially improve the employment situation of persons with disabilities. Though more than 20 years old, the country examples still highlight how technology was used in training and employment. For further information on this

study, click here: [New Technologies and the Employment of Disabled Persons](#)

Technology and disability in the workplace

The ILO has taken a number of measures to promote the promise of technology for people with disabilities. In 2001, the [Code of Practice: Managing Disability in the Workplace](#) was adopted, providing practical guidance on the management of disability issues in the workplace. The Code calls on competent authorities to facilitate contacts between employers' and workers' organizations, and with relevant professional agencies, service providers and disabled persons' organizations (DPOs), to exchange information regarding disability management in the workplace, including developments in techniques and technology for the adaptation of workplaces.

Technical cooperation

Several **technical cooperation projects** have been established in countries of Africa and Asia through the Government of Ireland- supported programme *Promoting Rights and Opportunities for People with Disabilities in Employment through Legislation* (PROPEL). In **Ethiopia**, for example, ILO/PROPEL worked with the Ethiopian Centre for Disability and Development (ECDD) in 2012 to help some 90 recent university graduates with disabilities in selected regions find employment. While CV writing, job hunting skills and confidence building formed an integral part of the intervention, the strategy also included the technological innovation of posting vacancies by government, and private and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the ECDD's website, and sharing them through a Google Group, personal e-mails and text messages. This enabled the ECDD to share job vacancies with persons who may have been unable to obtain information in accessible formats, in particular, if they had sensory or physical impairments. Of the group assisted by the project, 76 per cent were employed in government offices, private and public enterprises, institutions of higher learning, public schools and NGOs.

In 2011, the PROPEL programme produced the **online guide** “[Achieving Equal Employment Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities through Legislation](#)”. The aim of the guide is to support improved capacity of governments in collaboration with employers’ and workers’ organizations, partners and civil society to design, implement and evaluate legislation that effectively supports equal employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Public-private partnerships and good practices highlighting the promise of technology

G3ict is an outstanding example of an advocacy initiative in which public and private sectors collaborate to move forward an agenda on fully inclusive technology. It does this by raising awareness on effective policies and initiatives; facilitating the sharing of information on good practices; fostering harmonization and standardization, and supporting policy-makers through capacity building and bench-marking. The ILO is pleased to be part of this initiative, along with other UN agencies, the World Bank and several universities.

More recently, the ILO has established a public-private partnership, the [Global Business and Disability Network](#) (GBDN).

The GBDN brings together multinational enterprises, employers’ and DPOs and business networks that share the conviction that people with disabilities have talents and skills that can enhance virtually any business. Among its main aims, the GBDN helps to share knowledge, highlight good practices and exchange information on what multinational companies are doing to harness the power of technology to recruit, train and place women and men with disabilities.

The GBDN has published employers’ good practices highlighting how ICT and other measures are used to recruit, train and place workers with disabilities. The following are some of these stories:

From [The Inclusion of Youth with Disabilities: The Business Case, 2014](#)

EUREKA CALL CENTRE SYSTEMS – In Singapore, the owner of the call centre staffed by employees with disabilities has expanded it into a training centre to provide visually impaired persons with skills that would make them more

employable. Since 2009, Eureka has trained 41 persons, including 25 who were visually impaired and 13 who were younger than 30. The company has integrated software that can accommodate any level of visual impairment in the call centre. The software has been adapted to include shortcut keys for likely responses.

From [In Disability in the Workplace: Employers’ Organizations and Business Networks, 2011](#)

In the United Kingdom (UK), the Employers’ Forum on Disability (EFD) has some 350 members, including 100 multinational corporations, small- and medium-sized enterprises and public sector employers that employ about 18 per cent of the UK workforce. With the help of the consulting firm McKinsey & Company, EFD undertook the first research into obstacles created by inaccessible online recruitment systems. The study found that 1.3 million disabled people in the UK were unable to apply for jobs with the vast majority of companies that only recruit online. As a result, EFD published guidance on how to ensure that online recruitment does not systematically exclude women and men with disabilities and other disadvantaged jobseekers, backed by the web site: www.barrierfree-recruitment.com.

In Sri Lanka, the Employers’ Network on Disability developed a database of jobseekers with disabilities in 2001. The Network hired a consultancy firm to research the status of people with disabilities in the workplace, and compare

GBDN’s online self-assessment tool for employers

The GBDN has developed an online self-assessment tool to assist employers in assessing their current disability inclusion policies and practices. Using a simple methodology, the tool helps managers identify specific gaps as well as strengths and can also serve as a benchmarking tool.

The tool is primarily intended for multinational companies and can be used both at the global headquarters level and at the branch/subsidiary level, providing a company with a global overview of its current inclusion practices and of the next steps towards a harmonized and more inclusive multinational workplace.

their skills with labour market needs. It also created a web site where employers can identify potential employees among jobseekers with disabilities. By 2002, the database contained more than 1,200 jobseekers, with more than 4,000 still awaiting input. A survey of 100 EFC members who responded revealed that 25 had hired 179 people with disabilities. The Network was established by the Employers' Federation of Ceylon – the largest employers' organization in Sri Lanka. Its membership of some 539 companies employs more than 440,000 people.



Visually impaired man working at a call centre.
Photo credit: R. Sirirattananon.

For further information:

Conditions of Work and Equality Department
Gender, Equality and Diversity Branch

<http://www.ilo.org/disability>

Email: disability@ilo.org

Resources:

UN Enable: Factsheet on Persons with Disabilities, available at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=18>, accessed on 18 November 2014.

World Health Organization and the World Bank: World Report on Disability, 2011.

OECD: Sickness, Disability and Work, Keeping on Track in the Economic Downturn, Background Paper, High-Level Forum, Stockholm, 14-15 May 2009.

G3ict and Disabled People's International (DPI): CRPD 2013 ICT Accessibility Progress Report, November 2013.

ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Program on Disability, available at <http://www.ilo.org/inclusion>, accessed on 18 November 2014.

ILO Global Business and Disability Network, available at <http://www.businessanddisability.org>, accessed on 18 November 2014.

ILO: [New Technologies and the Employment of Disabled Persons, 1992](http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/1992/92B09_47_engl.pdf), http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/1992/92B09_47_engl.pdf, accessed on 20 November 2014.

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