

Employment Challenges facing Workers with Disabilities

The annual observance of the Month of the Disabled is meant to create an awareness of the challenges faced by persons in the community who have are living with some form of disability. The sensitization of the wider community is meant to call attention to how best it can support those persons who were born with, developed or acquired a disability during the course of life. The nature of the illness that persons suffer can contribute to a measure of impairment which may impose restrictions on their full and active participation in daily life, which includes work related activities.

It is the norm for people to take things for granted and hence the thought of acquiring a disability is one which is rarely entertained. Within the workplace many pay little attention to the risks and dangers which exists in the execution of their daily duties. The sensitization and education of workers to follow workplace rules and procedures, to observe safety and health practices in compliance with the Occupational Safety and Health at Work Act, is all in an effort to reduce incidences or accidents that may lead to persons acquiring a disability. It is for this reason that workers are encouraged to wear the appropriate personal protective equipment, which the employer is required by law to provide.

It is to be reinforced that workers have an obligation to protect themselves while at work, and should refrain from bad practices and habits, as these can lead to an injury of some kind to themselves or others; with the end result being some form of impairment being suffered. It would seem that workers with a disability are more prone to act cautiously. Based on the nature of the impairment and restrictions, persons with a disability tend to exercise a greater sense of awareness of what, how, when and where. This is to say that they are less likely to throw caution to the wind.

The fact that persons who have a disability may be constrained in some form or fashion, does not mean that they cannot function and be productive. The practice of the exclusion of workers because of a physical, visual, hearing or speech disability, is in itself is discriminatory and prejudice. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (May 2008), addressed the need to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for

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their inherent dignity. At the last count, some 175 United Nations member states endorsed this convention. It is therefore a matter of concern that despite this, the disabled community globally, continues to be marginalized.

This is a glaring injustice needs to be corrected, and it is puzzling to see how the world is prepared to effect the change.

The time may be right for national law to make provision that a workplace with a determined staff complement, should include a minimum number of persons with known disabilities. This seems to be a solution to the growing problem where persons with disabilities are denied the right to access employment. The notion that persons with disabilities are best fit to explore work as entrepreneurs and as members of the third sectors, is neither a just nor fair thought. Next, the removal of an employee from the workplace based on the individual having acquired a disability, is another practice which needs to be carefully monitored. Under this practice, an employee can be deemed medically unfit for work. In some instances, it raises questions of the inability of management to redeploy the individual within the organization, so that the talents, skills and Knowledge can be retained, rather than exercising the option to remove the employee from the workplace.

Within the confines of the workplace, employees with impairments continue to face the challenge where they are constrained by the lack of wheel chair access, hand rails and access to the appropriate technologies to assist them in doing their work. Research shows that “Persons with disabilities also face communication barriers— that is, physical and virtual challenges in accessing and sharing information. Assistive technology enables people to live healthy, productive and independent lives, but is far from available to all. It is estimated, for example, that 360 million people, globally, have moderate to profound hearing loss, yet hearing aid production meets less than 10 per cent of the need (WHO, 2016). Digital technologies can also break down traditional barriers to communication and information. However, evidence suggests that the level of use of information and communications technology (ICT) by persons with disabilities is significantly lower than among persons without a disability (WHO and World Bank, 2011). In some cases, they may be unable to obtain access even to basic products and services, such as telephones, television and the Internet.”

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As increase employment becomes an important element in the global economic recovery effort, there is the school of thought that “Persons with disabilities are less likely to be employed full-time and more likely to be unemployed (United Nations, 2016a and 2015c; ILO, 2014a).” There is the hope that employers in all sectors would undertake to apply equality of treatment in the recruitment and employment of persons, and so provide the opportunity for persons with a disability to work and so safeguard themselves from falling below the poverty line.