

13th session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRDP)

Roundtable 1 - "Disability and business: realizing the right to work in open, inclusive and accessible environments for persons with disabilities"

Panellist: Phyllis Choo, SG Enable

Co-chairs, ladies and gentlemen,

Introduction

First of all, a quick thank you to the organisers for this timely round-table discussion.

Singapore is committed to the goals and aspirations set out under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Over the years, our country has taken steps to ensure that persons with disabilities have progressively greater access to opportunities for education and employment, and to participate as integral and contributing members of society. In this regard, SG Enable, which is a key partner of the Singapore Government in administering disability services, works closely with the Ministries of Social and Family Development and Manpower to promote employment for persons with disabilities.

We recognise that employment is not just about earning an income; it's also about empowering persons with disabilities to be socially connected, and to be able to exercise their talents and achieve their life goals. Successfully placing and sustaining persons with disabilities in employment requires a thoughtful and multi-faceted approach, with the public, private and non-profit sectors working in concert.

Ready employees

Singapore recognises that jobs-oriented vocational skills training and school-to-work transition support for youths with disabilities are key to enabling the full enjoyment of the right to work.

Special education - or SPED - schools have, for decades, been preparing students for working life. In fact, the Ministry of Education, working with SPED schools, developed the Framework for Vocational Education in 2010 to deepen and broaden vocational education and improve the employability of SPED students.

In addition, students with special needs in both mainstream and SPED schools, including those with intellectual disabilities and autism, have the opportunity to participate in transition-to-work programmes that give them real-world work exposure.

For example, SPED students can take part in the School-To-Work Programme, which includes a structured programme of up to 2 years that provides training and authentic work experiences, with the opportunity for job placement. SPED schools also tap local networks to provide students with work experience programmes and internships.

Other transition programmes like the IHL Internship Programme and the RISE Mentorship Programme, which is a collaborative effort with the Singapore Business Network on Disability, help tertiary-educated young people with disabilities gain work experience, better understanding of their skills and build professional networks.

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Ready Employers

On the other hand, it is insufficient to focus solely on persons with disabilities. Without employers who are willing and able to employ and sustain persons with disabilities in the workplace, there can be no realisation of the right to work.

The Singapore government has put in place public programmes and fiscal supports to promote the employment of persons with disabilities

- For example, from 2021, employers hiring Singaporeans with disabilities who earn less than SGD4000 a month (or USD2952) will automatically receive wage offsets of up to SGD400 (or USD198) per month per employee.
- And under the Open Door Programme, employers can receive funding to defray the cost of reasonable workplace accommodations, as well as training subsidies when they send employees on courses that build their confidence in working with colleagues with disabilities.

Policy measures aside, we recognise that employers may lack understanding of the competence of persons with disabilities, or have internalised negative messages around disabilities. They may also lack the skills and knowledge to create inclusive workplaces.

To address this, SG Enable runs a suite of programmes aimed at building the capabilities of employers in disability inclusive hiring, such as the bite-sized Disability Awareness Workshops, and the High Impact Retention and Employment programme, which is a series of 6 sessions targeting HR professionals.

Just 2 months ago, the Enabling Mark was launched by SG Enable with the support of the Singapore Business Federation Foundation. This Mark is a national-level accreditation framework for disability inclusive hiring; it benchmarks employers for their inclusive hiring practices and outcomes, and enables them to improve through structured assessment, engagement and consultancy. A first of its kind in Singapore, it underlines the commitment of the business community to inclusive employment.

Encouraging examples of inclusive hiring can be found among local and multinational companies, employers large and small, representing diverse sectors. In 2019, a record 111 organisations and individuals were honoured for inclusive employment at the Enabling Employers Award - an increase of more than 50% compared to the previous edition.

More than 140 employers have also taken up the President's Challenge Enabling Employment Pledge, to commit to adopting an inclusive mindset and implementing supportive employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

COVID-19 Outbreak and Future of Work

Measures such as these are especially important now, as Singapore has not been spared from the economic fallout of Covid-19. Our economy has contracted and resident unemployment rate has increased from 3.3% in March 2020 to 4.7% in September 2020.

In response, the National Jobs Council has spearheaded the national effort to bring together jobs and training opportunities. SGD1 billion (or USD740 million) has been set aside under the Jobs Growth Incentive to provide wage offsets, to encourage employers to bring forward hiring and create jobs for locals.

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Recognising the vulnerability of persons with disabilities, the Singapore government has provided higher wage offsets for newly hired employees with disabilities, to sustain their inclusion in the workplace. Through the Job Redesign Grant, we are subsidising the cost of equipping the homes of employees with disabilities for telecommuting. And a dedicated work stream has been set up in the Jobs Council to develop targeted measures that promote disability employment.

Conclusion

Despite dark clouds, there are opportunities - sectors like the public sector, eldercare and logistics are hiring; digitalisation of work and telecommuting, which are the norm now, have potential to benefit persons with disabilities in the post-Covid future.

As we work towards building back better, Singapore remains committed to promoting inclusive workplaces and increasing the participation of persons with disabilities in the workforce. We have made significant progress over the years, but as always, more remains to be done.

Thank you.