

OPINIONS & PERSPECTIVES

Paid work – A valued social role that is empowering more people with an intellectual disability and providing employers with dedicated employees!

JOHN GRANT

SkillWise, Christchurch, New Zealand

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It is widely acknowledged both in New Zealand and overseas that people with a disability are chronically underemployed and unemployed. A key factor is the lack of opportunities that have been available to these individuals to experience work in the open labour market. This is because until recently, many people with disabilities (particularly intellectual and psychiatric) were confined to institutions, and were therefore isolated from the wider society and not permitted to lead the “ordinary life” most of us take for granted. They were labelled with devaluing roles such as “patient”, which carried with them a stigma that led to much discrimination and social isolation. Vocational training and employment support occurred largely in a sheltered environment; these were limited in scope, and did not encourage people towards greater independence and self-determination.

However there is now increasing evidence of changing attitudes towards employing people with a disability. Academics, policy-makers and support agencies have been instrumental in precipitating a paradigm shift over the past 10 years, whereby the focus of disability support services now rests firmly on a person’s strengths and abilities, and on supporting them to experience a better quality of life. A quality of life that is enhanced through participation and inclusion in their community through valued social roles such as “employee”.

The paradigm shift in the provision of disability support services began in earnest in the early 1990s with the *deinstitutionalisation* process. Deinstitutionalisation in New Zealand and overseas was

underpinned by the notion of community inclusion and participation. Most services were devolved from hospital settings into the community. This precipitated the physical reintegration of people who were living in institutions; however the challenge of social inclusion was just beginning!

More recent government disability policy in New Zealand has demonstrated a commitment to inclusion and the empowerment of people with a disability. The *New Zealand Disability Strategy* (Minister for Disability Issues, 2001) represents a long-term strategy for changing New Zealand from a disabling to an inclusive society. It envisages a society that highly values people with a disability and continually enhances their full participation, with a clear focus on the creation of opportunities in employment and economic development. *Pathways to Inclusion* (Ministry of Social Development, 2001), which builds on aspects of the Disability Strategy, sets out a framework for improving the quality of services that assist people to participate in their communities. It provides a clear focus for vocational services, namely to increase the participation of people with a disability in employment and the wider community. Services need to ensure that people with a disability gain real skills and real jobs, and play an active part in the workforce and their community.

In addition, the Ministry of Social Development (2007) has recently announced a raft of new initiatives to expand employment and training assistance, including for people with a disability. These include a Transition to Work Grant designed

to assist with the costs of searching for and starting work, a Course Participation Assistance contribution to assist with transport, childcare and course fees, as well as enhancing wage subsidy schemes. These changes came into effect on 30 April 2007.

The next significant phase (and arguably the most important) in the process of increased social inclusion is for the wider society to embrace the fact that people with a disability want to work and are very capable of work! The benefits of work for both the individual and society in general are well documented. These include greater financial independence, a sense of purpose and belonging, increased social networks, and increased autonomy and self-determination. All of which contribute to a better quality of life.

Disability support providers play a pivotal role in facilitating these employment opportunities. There is no doubt that providers are increasingly recognising the importance of collaboration in service provision. This is reflected in the fact that different vocational and employment support providers are working more closely together, as well as working more closely with residential providers. In fact, there are initiatives taking place at a national level, involving umbrella groups such as the New Zealand Federation of Vocational and Support Services (VASS) and the National Residential Intellectual Disability Providers (NRID), to develop systems that will ensure an ongoing commitment to working in a collaborative fashion. This will greatly assist in continuing to create a more individualised approach to support which facilitates increased opportunities for people with a disability to enjoy a better quality of life. However, it is the link between organisations in the not-for-profit sector and those in the business sector that holds the key to greatly increasing the range of opportunities for people with a disability to obtain the socially valued role of “employee”.

Community participation is a new approach to disability support that emerged out of Pathways to Inclusion. It epitomises a commitment to the fundamental principles contained in the New Zealand Disability Strategy. Moreover, it is indicative of the paradigm shift in disability support that has seen a move away from the traditional models of support based on a segregated approach, towards an integrated and inclusive approach. In essence, community participation involves providing training, education and support to ensure that people are able to integrate into the wider community through the facilitation of a range of work, education, leisure and recreational opportunities. This equates to a model of support that is based more around facilitation and

“brokerage”. In other words, people receive some degree of training and education directly from the service provider, but are supported and encouraged to take advantage of opportunities in the wider community. This may include further training and education within a mainstream education setting, leisure and recreational pursuits within the wider community, as well as employment opportunities. A number of organisations previously operating as sheltered workshops have now embraced this new approach to disability support.

Supported employment has existed in New Zealand for over 15 years. The focus is on supporting a person with a disability into paid work in the open labour market. This involves assisting a person with the job search process, interviews, and placement into employment. Critical to this approach is ensuring a good match between the person’s skills and abilities and the requirements of the job. Furthermore, the support provided is not just confined to the employee, but also includes support for the employer. This ensures a smooth transition for all concerned.

A good example of what can be achieved through community participation and supported employment providers working collaboratively is seen in the close working relationship between SkillWise and Catapult Employment Services Trust in Christchurch, New Zealand. For those people wishing to find paid work, the collaborative approach offered by SkillWise and Catapult greatly increases the potential for a sustainable employment outcome. The support provided by SkillWise assists with such factors as enhancing a person’s work ethic, and developing a raft of transferable skills that assist in securing work. This includes several volunteer work initiatives as well as a number of training and education programs. Catapult provides practical initiatives designed to assist people to gain a greater understanding of the skills required in a variety of different jobs. This may include work-place visits, work experience and, for more and more clients, paid work! The support provided by Catapult is not time-limited and extends to employers as well as employees.

In the 3 years during which SkillWise and Catapult have had a formal collaboration, 33 people (representing almost one-third of SkillWise clients supported during that time) have found some type of long-term paid work. Of these 33, 11 remain in paid employment. In the case of the 22 individuals for whom longer-term sustainable employment was not achieved, 17 were due either to the work coming to an end or to the work placement not being suitable. The majority of these people had no previous work

history (other than in a sheltered workshop). Therefore, there is a degree of “trial and error” involved, as people are afforded the opportunity to experience work in the open labour market and so gain a greater understanding of the fundamental differences between sheltered work and paid work. This will, in time, allow people to be better placed to know what work they are good at and enjoy.

Given that there is now a diverse, flexible and dynamic labour market, disability support providers are in a position to help ensure that we have an increasingly diverse, flexible and dynamic labour force. A great opportunity now exists for employers to utilise the skills and abilities of a group of people

who have been largely isolated from the labour market in the past, and at the same time to contribute to developing a fully inclusive society.

References

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