

Disability: Channelising Abilities¹

Shanti Raghavan

Persons with disabilities are neither less abled nor less efficient than others, but they fail to get employment because employers are unable to use their potential, says Shanti Raghavan.

AJAY (name changed) did well in his engineering and had many offers from companies. He started working soon after his engineering in a plum job when one day, at a client site, he had a bad fall and lost his eyesight. Suddenly his world turned upside down. The company that employed him and used his abilities, his circle of friends and his own family now considered him disabled and not very useful. They suddenly forgot the abilities which made him who he was and still is. He plunged into a world of darkness where all his activities came to a stop. He was a voracious reader who then sat idle and a chatterbox who grew silent. After a couple of years, a chance meeting with another visually impaired person who provided awareness gave him a ray of hope. He started working on rehabilitating himself. He "accepted" his condition and decided to remove the word "not possible" from his dictionary. For every activity that he could not do, he looked for alternate ways to do it. From reading books, to moving around, to using the computer, to trekking, to swimming and so on. His journey took him two to three years, but he finally got back on his feet. He was still the same old Ajay with the same old abilities but with a new found wisdom that there are different innovative ways to get things done. He applied for many jobs in the same companies who had made offers but to no avail. The same Ajay was not seen in the same light as before.

Leena (name changed) has polio in both legs from birth. Moving around was a huge challenge. She started using callipers in her legs and used crutches to move around. Going to school, to the bathroom, climbing stairs -

everything was a challenge. Leena managed to go to school with the help of her father who carried her on his back when she needed to climb stairs and she somehow finished her 10th standard. Due to poverty, she was forced to look for a job. The industrial belt near her house had many unskilled jobs to offer. She knocked at many doors but was turned away by the guards at the gate. One company who was willing to give her a job required her to climb two floors which was not possible. Many jobs in the garment sector required standing. The sitting job of a tailor was not possible since she had to use her leg to use the machine. Some companies turned out to be very far away and required her to travel by auto since she could not use the buses which are inaccessible. She could only go by pedalling her tricycle. She could not afford a scooter with extra wheels to go to these companies. She finally got a job in a company which was in the ground floor near her house after two years of searching for a job but found the environment very stressful since the pressure on targets was very high. She quit the job in 10 days.

The challenges for a person with disability when they look for a job are many. When companies can choose people who are non disabled, they do not need to look at hiring disabled. Due to lack of awareness, many are not aware of the abilities of a person such as Ajay. To be fair to these companies, they are not aware how Ajay or Leena can be used productively in their company. Even if companies are willing to hire, the issues such as transportation or finance also create a problem.

So what is the solution?

The solutions have many important components.

- **Provide workplace solutions:** First and foremost, most companies do not know how to enable persons with disability such as Ajay and Leena. They do not see how Leena can be a tailor or how Ajay can work efficiently on a project proposal. Companies have to realise that any person with disability can do any

¹ This article has taken from One India One People with the consent of the author. The story of Ajay and Leena highlight the challenges for a person with disability which starts with awareness, getting rehabilitated, getting access to education, being included in every day society, getting access to basic services to getting a job and leading a life with dignity.

job as long as there is a feasible solution or alternate method to get the work done and there are less barriers in the environment. We have been using alternate methods to do many activities for years but have never realised it. See all the tools you use to overcome your limitations from ladders to calculators to binoculars to cars and you will understand that it is all about alternate workplace solutions. So Leena can use a hand operated machine to work on the tailoring machine. And Ajay can use a talking computer loaded with screen reader software to type his project proposal.

- **Provide the business case:** Companies have been provided the business case that has been propagated by NGOs such as Enable India. The business case is simple - companies need employable people with the right skills and attitude. We tell companies to hire employable persons with disability. But why should they hire employable disabled candidates when there are so many non disabled to choose from? The interesting fact is that when they hire persons with disability who are right for the job, they not only get a good resource, they also become more solution oriented and provide different solutions so that the person with disability can work productively. This also raises the bar in the company when the disabled can do the work that others do. When a company is able to appreciate the ability of person with disability, everybody in the company feels that their value will also be appreciated. When the company goes out of its way to include different kinds of people, this helps them become more inclusive which helps in morale and to get loyalty from employees. Hence companies become more competitive. Persons with disability such as Ajay and Leena serve as an inspiration or motivation for co-workers.
- **Provide employable resources:** This is the most important solution. When a person with disability is given the right platform to develop, the results are amazing. In the trainings at Enable India which have been conducted in multiple cities from Bangalore to Odisha, we have seen interesting results. Disabled who have never stepped out of their house for 20

years to some who have never interacted with people have a transformation with the help of one key ingredient in the training which is EXPECTATIONS WITH LOVE. When the training is conducted and candidates with disability are given challenges and are asked to perform as per targets, the first reaction is usually filled with excuses and is not positive because there is very less expectation from a disabled person. The environment provided to them is of empowerment, of learning to solve their own problems, of learning on their own and more. Within a week, the transformation begins. Each candidate rises to the challenge and comes to class despite all the odds, takes on responsibilities, starts interacting with the outside world, does the project work assigned in a professional manner, does the mandatory social work with a proud heart and eventually become finished products ready for the market!

- **Provide solutions and services:** When companies want to hire a disabled, many NGOs provide end to end services to enable the company. For example by providing awareness workshops within the company, working on making their policies and procedures disabled friendly and providing post placement support. Such services go a long way in enabling companies to hire candidates with disability.

The current scenario

Slowly due to the performance of persons with disability and the business reasons becoming more clear, word of mouth has started increasing and now more companies across multiple cities are coming forward to hire the disabled. This includes multi nationals, medium sized companies to even start up companies.

Government organisations and PSUs have a mandate and have to hire 3% persons with disability. They are waking up to the potential of the disabled and are looking at using workplace solutions to enable the disabled to work and use their potential. After all, when persons with disability have appeared and passed the competitive exams or have cleared the selection process, their ability is not in question. Only the ability of the employer to use their potential is the issue.

What is needed now?

- More persons with disability need awareness, access to education, access to finance, access to solutions to come out of their houses and learn to become employable.
- Research and development in workplace solutions is key to developing more jobs for disabled.
- Access in companies and accessible transportation is

also very critical. More trained resources working with the disabled is the need of the hour.

We see persons with disability playing a much larger role in India and in the world. Our vision for them is to be a better Indian and better global citizen. When they work with quality and efficiency and with sincerity in their job and when they are inclusive of people around them, *they will be the change that they want to see in the world.*

APPENDIX

Some of the roles that persons with different disabilities are working (Persons with vision impairment, hearing impairment, physical disability, persons with cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, persons with mental illness and persons with intellectual disabilities)

Skilled roles:

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|----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| • Programmer | • Telemarketing | • HR executive |
| • Trainer | • Customer service executive | • Service Management Executive |
| • Data entry operator | • Medical Transcriptionist | • Business Development Executive |
| • Service Co-ordinator | • Tester | • Accountant |
| • Medical Transcriptionist | • Back Office Executive | • MIS Executive |
| • Verifier | • Finance Executive | • Network Operator |
| • Admin Executive | • Market Analyst | |

Semi Skilled roles:

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| • Receptionist | • Cashier | • Telecaller |
| • Lab Assistant | • Office Assistant | • Security |
| • Data entry Operator | • Tour Guide | • Tailor |
| • CCTV Operator | • Assembler | |

Unskilled Roles :

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| • Brew Master | • House keeping | • Kitchen Assistant |
| • Laundry Assistant | • Customer Service Attendant | • Packer |

Shanti Raghavan is the Founder and Managing Trustee of Enable India, a non profit organisation that works for the economic independence and dignity of persons with disability across India. She is the recipient of the prestigious Ashoka Fellowship awarded to social entrepreneurs across the globe for their innovative and practical ideas to bring about large-scale social change. A recipient of many awards and honours, Shanti Raghavan recently received the Amazing Indian award from Times Now.