

## MAINSTREAMING PERSONS WITH DISABILITY AT THE WORKPLACE: AN ASSET OR A LIABILITY?

**Risper Kerubo Omari<sup>1\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Development Studies, School of Human Resource Development, University of Eldoret, Kenya*

**\*Corresponding Author:-**

Email: [Risperomari2014@gmail.com](mailto:Risperomari2014@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract:-**

*Disability inflicts about 16% of the population in the world. Disability limits their ability to make use of all their senses or limits locomotion. The constitution provides for all to have access to equal opportunities for education and there after employment. However statistics show that the participation of people with disability at the work place still remains at a low level. The objectives of this review paper were; to establish reasons why employers shun Persons with Disabilities (PWD), analyse the benefits of mainstreaming disability in organisations and to explore strategies for incorporating PWD in organisations. The paper specifically aims to exemplify the rare advantages that having PWD brings to an organization including; incorporation of reliable employees, better corporate image, increased motivation levels, improved accommodation among others.*

**Key words:-***PWD, Disabilities, Persons with Disability, Disabled people, Inclusive Workforce*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Disability is a phenomenon that has been part of mankind for as long as humanity has existed. Statistics shows that about 16% of the total world's population is living with one form of disability or another. There are many different forms of disability including physical disability, hearing impaired, visual disability, psychotic and learning disabilities among others. Even more forms of disabilities are now being diagnosed. It is from this population that the employers have and continue to derive their workforce, shareholders, clients and other business stakeholders (Wittmer & Wilson, 2010). The government spends considerable amount of money in the training of people with disability many non-governmental organizations also spent millions of shillings of donor funding in the course of equipping persons with disability with skills to survive in the job market. Depending on the nature of the disability the amount of money spent to train persons with disability is considerably high. It would, therefore, not make any logical sense for a nation to spend funds training a group of people and after that not offer them a chance to practice their skills and contribute to the productivity of their nation. The forms and extents of disability differ in a population. There are those in the society that are severely disabled, and all that can be done is to support them to live an acceptable quality of life. Others, on the other hand, when given the right environment, are very capable of performing their duties far better than the rest of the population without a disability.

There have been legislations worldwide that increase the opportunities for people with disability to join the workforce. In Kenya, there are quotas that are created for them in the workforce so as to increase their participation in the national economy. These are secured by the constitution. Workplaces are also required by law to make facilities in the workplace accommodative to persons living with disability. On the face value, it can hence be said that provisions are there to effectively accommodate persons with disability into the workforce. However, the reality on the ground is they remain under-represented in most workplaces. Perhaps the most significant barrier to full involvement in the workforce for people with disability is the stereotypic attitudes and assumptions of most people and especially employers about people with disability (Smith et al., 2004). These assumptions are in the form of what people think is their limitations due to their disability. If employers were exposed to the more positive contribution that people living with disability can bring to their organization then maybe the situation would change for the better. This paper seeks to outline the reasons why employers should make aggressive deliberate effort to increase the number of employees with disability within their workforce.

## **REASONS FOR EXCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

From schools to work places, these people have been discriminated against despite there being laws that protect them against such discrimination (Longhi, Nicoletti & Platt, 2012). Employers cite diverse reasons why they are reluctant to hire PWDs.

Low productivity is one of the reasons why employers tend to avoid PWD. Productivity of a PWD, depending on the type of assignments they are given is low compared to a normal worker. It is not their wish to be less productive but the nature of their conditions cannot allow them to be utilized fully yet they earn a full salary (Gunderson & Lee, 2016). This leads to an organization incurring an extra cost in paying people who are not productive enough due to their disabilities.

Secondly, PWDs tend to be faulty. For instance, if a person's hearing is impaired, it is difficult to communicate instructions to such people. When they are given instructions, there may be a communication breakdown due to inconsistencies that may be inherent in the language being used which is sign language. This leads to faults in the operations of an organization. When there are faulty operations, the organization may incur losses that could be avoidable if the tasks were to be assigned to normal people (Hinman, et al., 2015).

Relating with PWD may be difficult in an organization because they are special cases who need specialized attention at the work place. These people at times feel intimidated when they are assigned the same tasks as their normal colleagues and that may lead to conflicts since they need to be assisted to perform their duties. In this case it becomes a great challenge to engage with them and that results in unnecessary conflicts.

Organizations fear the responsibility of taking care of PWD in their workplaces. There are extra costs that may be incurred in customizing some functions to suit the needs of workers with disabilities. This poses a challenge to management since they are keen on cutting costs. Again, the organizations office landscape may be altered to accommodate the needs of these people. That also leads to increased costs to the organizations (Baldwin & Choe, 2014).

However, the above reasons notwithstanding, it is unethical for organizations to shun PWD, since these people are part of society and need the society for their survival and, therefore, employers should accommodate.

## **A Tough Nut**

It has been argued that if an employer wants a workforce that thinks outside the box then it is important for the employer to target a part of the workforce that is naturally inclined to think outside the box. Persons with disability have grown up facing and overcoming challenge after challenge in their lives. Challenges do not scare them. The challenges that they have probably faced to get to the level of being employable has made them develop persistence and perseverance (Graffam et al., 2002). Persons with disabilities are always constantly thinking of smarter ways to get things done and also how to get around obstacles. Persons with disability have been shown to be more eager to take up challenges in the workplace more readily compared to the other workers. This is the correct mindset that any company needs. These people will not settle for how things have always been done but will constantly seek newer ways of doing it better. A person with disability

as long as that disability does not affect their intellectual ability can hence become the pivot of innovation for a company and when this spills over to the rest of the workforce then the effects on the returns are good and an advantage to the company. Their persistence also sets a good example to the rest of the able-bodied staff to give their best given that they do not have limitations. This, in the long run, creates a hardworking and highly motivated workforce.

### **Passion and Commitment**

People with disability are naturally passionate about things they do. They know very well the limitations of job options that their disability exposes them to. For this reason, they hold dearly the jobs that they get. When they get a job that they love and are treated well by the employer, then their rate of absenteeism from work is much lower compared to other employees (Graffam et al., 2002).

### **Employee Retention**

Also, their retention rates are higher compared to workers without disabilities. A person with disability will only leave an organization when situations are very bad, or the next job offer is exceptionally good. Depending on the nature of the disability there are modifications that are usually made on facilities of the workplace to take care of the disability. This includes special seats and ramps or modifications at the washrooms for those with physical disability, For the visually impaired they take time to learn their environment so as to be able to move around freely without assistance (Hiring the Invisible Workforce, 2000). The adaptations to the environment differ depending on the nature of the disability. These people would then naturally stay in one organization to avoid the disturbances of relocation because they also have anxiety over properly adjusting to their new environment.

### **Work Social Relationships**

When persons with disabilities interact with a group of people, they take some time to note the characteristics of these people and strike a friendship with those that genuinely care for them. Friendships that are developed with disabled people are usually perhaps most deep and sincere. This is because the true friend will from time to time help the person with disability overcome some challenges in the environment. Due to the numerous misconceptions that exist about persons with disability very few people can understand them and form a functional friendship with them. Some people outright fear them, others disregard them while others think that by showing sympathy then they are showing concern. When a disabled person finds a person that truly understands them and treat them as normal persons then they would like to keep that company for as long as possible (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014). All this reason ensures that a person with disability does not do job hopping like other able bodied people. This saves an organization the costs that are involved in replacing a staff member that has left their job such as the cost of advertising, recruiting and eventually training the new employee until they can deliver to the expected level. A company that has persons with disability in key positions is assured of fewer interruptions.

### **Enhanced Goodwill**

Opening the doors of employment to persons with disability especially for companies that are in business can bring some surprising good benefits. It has been established that one in five families have a person living with a type of disability. When this population is looked at in terms of a customer base, then it presents a very large potential source of revenue for the company (Cimera, 2002). When word goes out that a certain company has employment policies that are friendly to persons living with disabilities then people are more likely to want to support them by buying their goods and services. Marketing research has also shown that families living with one or more persons living with disability are more significantly likely to do business with a disabilityfriendly company (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014). This combined interest in the goods and services of such a company will lead to increased revenues.

### **Indirect Economic Benefits**

In some countries such as Australia and the United States, there are tax incentives that are put in place to encourage employers to hire people with disabilities (McCray, 2005). Some of these tax incentives include opportunity tax credit that provides a tax credit of up to a maximum of \$2,400 for each and every person with a disability hired. Small businesses are also entitled to receive a tax credit for the cost of accommodation that covers the eligible expenditures. These governments also offer aid to the company in the form of technical and financial aid to purchase and install the equipment to help the person with disability fit better at the workplace. The governments also offer in-house training of the staff on issues dealing with inclusivity.

Most governments view the disabled people as a disadvantaged minority group. For this reason, the government puts a considerable amount of money into the training of those people with disabilities. They are entitled to bursaries and other special considerations by the government (Hernandez et al., 2007). They hence present a highly trained but disadvantaged part of the society. Research in the United States shows that 2 of 3 people living with disabilities, who are trained, would like to get employed and yet over 55% of them remain unemployed. For a company that would like to tap into a highly trained yet untapped job pool, and then they should consider recruiting from among the people with disability. This will be a big plus to the company given the fact that this cohort of the workforce have been proven always to get the job done to specifications with dedication and within the time limits. They also show the least attrition rates. Also given that the government through affirmative action offers them an opportunity to get trained in some rare skills.

Research has shown that when some sensory senses are weakened or absent then the ones that are present are reinforced (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014). This is the case with people with disability. This scientific fact makes them very good in

learning skills that need the use of the sensory ability that is still present in the disabled person. They can perform such tasks better than persons with all their sensory abilities intact. This has persons with disabilities perform certain psychomotor skills to a very high level of perfection not seen in other people. Persons with disability make the best artists, musicians, technicians among other fine motor skills. A firm that is interested in one of these skills will be better off hiring a person with a disability so as to enjoy high-quality service.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility**

Hiring persons with disability into an organization will make the organization an employer of choice for the large pool of talented people (Wittmer & Wilson, 2010). A company that goes out of its way to make its working environment suitable for those people with disability, hiring them and retaining them is generally viewed as not only interested in the labor they can get from the people in the locality where the company is situated but also has a genuine care for its people. This is seen as a social responsibility that begins right within the workforce. The able-bodied qualified persons will also be interested to be linked with such a company that is perceived to care truly for its workforce and hence the company will be able to attract and retain a highly qualified pool of employees. This will eventually bring a diverse range of abilities and skills to the company a valuable perspective to any workforce.

There is also the issue of shifting demographics in most western nations. The Europe and North America have witnessed a growth in the number of senior citizen and a decline in the birth rates (Wittmer & Wilson, 2010). Some countries are facing a decline in the number of able bodied young people to take up the jobs left by the retiring senior citizens. To these countries, it would make a lot of logic include as many of their citizens into the labor market as possible. These countries have hence witnessed an increase in the number of people living with disabilities that have entered the labor market. This is the way the whole world is eventually heading as the cost of living increases it is prudent to get all involved in the process of acquisition of income.

There has also been a great change in the social family context. While several decades ago it was natural for families to take care of each other and care for their old and persons with disability. There has been an increase in individualism, and the old are committed to old age home. Those with severe disability are also committed to homes, but those with a moderate disability must join the workforce. A company that is seen to be offering a chance for this gets a good reputation. These companies have even gone ahead to report better service as the presence of a disabled person doing the same job that is performed by an able bodied person and even doing it better than the able bodied person has had the effect of acting as a motivation to the able-bodied people to perform to their best. The presence of an excelling disabled person in a firm is a motivation to the rest of the workforce to do their best (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014).

### **Cost-effectiveness**

Hiring PWD into an organization is considered to be cost effective in the long run. This is for several reasons. First in most workplaces the incidences of recorded occupational health and safety accidents are far less among the disabled workforce compared to the able-bodied persons (Wittmer & Wilson, 2010). This can be attributed to the fact that the disabled people approach hazardous situations with a lot more care. They know that they are disadvantaged and hence more prone to accidents and for this reason they are more careful. This bears fruits because they end up being safer compared to the other workers who may be presumptive of some situations while working in potentially hazardous situations and hence end up being injured. This saves money for the company in terms of rehabilitation for the injured workers and compensation law suits that may injure the image of the company.

### **Improved Accommodation**

By having people with diverse forms of disability the ergonomics of the work place end up being improved to accommodate them. These improvements are in the form of adding nonslip material to the floors, installation of radars and elevators, talking alarms or luminous alarms among other improvements (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014). These installations to accommodate the various disabilities may initially cost the company but in the long run they form part of a worthy investment because it ensures the general safety and better working environment for the whole work force. This will translate to less occupational accidents and hence fewer costs for the company in terms of compensation claims and rehabilitation due to accidents.

There is a good business sense that a business stands to get when they are all inclusive in their recruitment of the workforce. In the past 100 years, there have been progressive increases in the advocacy for the rights of groups that are considered to be a minority. Disabled people fall into this category (Kalargyrou & Volis, 2014). When a business is established to have employment policies that are friendly towards the disabled then there will be a good public perception of the company and this will result in more people wanting to be associated with the company. The association will not only come in the form of attraction of a wider pool of highly qualified personnel but it will as come in the form of people that would like to be associated with the company as shareholders. When an increased number of people are interested in the shares of a company and the company is doing well financially then the value of the company will increase.

### **Corporate Image**

Organizations do not exist for the sake of profits alone. Businesses always want to be viewed as a good corporate citizen. There are several ways that a company can paint the picture of being a good corporate citizen key among them being implementing the policy of non-discrimination. When a company has established a system of inclusivity into its employment practices, then it creates a good corporate image. Good corporate image brings with it a lot of advantages to the organization such as celebrity endorsements, partnering with renowned non-governmental organizations among other

benefits (Wittmer & Wilson, 2010). These endorsements bring the company the advantage of being appealing to the potential clientele and hence increasing the customer base of the company and in so doing increase the profits.

It is a legislative requirement for organizations to be all inclusive in their employment practices (Hernandez et al, 2007). Some organizations do this without the need to be pushed while others do not. When an organization out of their own intuitive includes people with disability into their workforce they will be complying with both the domestic and international standards labor requirements. This will give the company a good international image and this comes with many benefits as prominent people and businesses would like to associate with companies that meet the laid down legal requirement. This can open up opportunities for the company to partner with organizations that create a lot of growth opportunities for the company.

When a company has incorporated people with various disabilities into their work force, it will enable those employees that have never had a chance to interact with people with disabilities a chance to do so. This in turn can have very good effects on the entire workforce (Cimera, 2006).

When they see the challenges that the people with disability can face and overcome at their work place they will begin to be more appreciative of things that they have always taken for granted. A company that has a workforce that has been enabled to look at issues from such an insightful angle is at an advantage. There will be a general improvement in the drive to do their best, an increased morale of the workforce. There will also be a general improvement of customer relations, especially when dealing with customers that have a form of disability. These improved relations will lead to increased sales especially to the disabled community, brand enhancement, and generally increased employee satisfaction.

### **STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION**

PWD are often endowed specific unique abilities which able-bodied people may not be having. This calls for the incorporation of these people in the organizations and ensuring that they are facilitated as appropriate in their places of assignment. Throughout the world, disabled people are being engaged at all levels of work. There are various strategies that can be employed in ensuring PWDs are not discriminated against since disability is not inability.

Employers need to adopt disability management strategies towards this end. This may entail, among others, intergrating in organizational employment policies, strategies for managing disability at the work place (Crow & Gault, 1994). The policies should make sure that all people are offered equal employment opportunities since all people need the jobs for their survival. Besides, a retention policy should be in place in case an employee becomes disabled. This encourages people to work in the organization and improve their performance (Habeck, et al., 1998)

Another strategy that can be used in managing disability is matching duties with people's disabilities. When assigning duties, the managers should consider the abilities of different people. Heavy tasks should not be assigned to PWD if they are not in a position to work on them.

This will encourage them to work to the organization's requirements and satisfaction. It is important to note that workers need to be motivated to perform optimally. PWD are no exception. When they are assigned to duties that they can comfortably perform, they will be as productive as other workers (Bruyere & Erickson, 2000).

PWD should be encouraged to take up leadership positions since this will make them take care of the needs of the other PWDs in an organization since normal people may not understand the challenges that they may be having in performing different duties that they are assigned to perform. Further, when the disabled are in top management and leadership positions, it acts as a motivation to others since they get encouraged and believe that they have equal chances with their able-bodied counterparts and that makes them more efficient and effective (Foster, 2013).

The work environment should be made conducive to accommodate people with disabilities. This includes the structuring of the office landscape to make the movement of these people easy within the office if they are physically impaired. Pathways should be provided for those who use wheelchairs for easy movement and independence within the office since people need to move around the office to make sure all duties are attended to effectively. This will make the PWDs to enjoy the work environment and perform better in their duties (Dagit & Lathrop, 2004).

Employers should also include a voluntary disclosure form into their job invitation forms, Voluntary disclosure helps the employer understands the needs of the various employees with various special needs (Simonsen, Luecking & Fabian, 2015). Also, the employer can reach out to various special groups that deal with PWD so as to get the PWD with the skills that they are interested in. The employer should also be able to understand and be ready to implement the various responsibilities that they have towards PWD that they incorporate into their workforce. This is important so that the company does not set up on a venture that will eventually see them run into legal tarsals for not providing the right working environment for is PWD workforce.

### **CONCLUSION**

Organizations need to adopt a more all-inclusive approach to their employment of the workforce where it lacks. PWD, when given employment opportunities, are an asset rather than a liability to the employer. Any company that desires to improve productivity and expand its customer base should adopt an employment policy that embraces diversity particularly disadvantaged groups of society. Therefore, including PWD in the workforce should not be viewed, merely, as a move to fulfill a constitutional requirement but a deliberate effort to tap into an important resource that will no doubt

add great value to the organization. The benefits of incorporating people with disability into the workforce outweigh the possible costs and hence the need to put a strong case for workforces that are all inclusive.

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