

Attitudes and Integration

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One of the main objectives of this year, the International Year of Disabled Persons, is to support the integration of people with a disability (PwDs) into society. To this end, we face two barriers: One is a physical barrier, owing to the physical limitations of PwDs. The other is a psychological barrier, that is, hindrances caused by people's attitudes towards PwDs, as well as the PwDs' own attitudes.

At first sight, the physical barrier cannot be helped, whereas the psychological barrier can be reduced easily. Quite the contrary. Because of the vast improvements in modern living conditions and the advances in modern technology such as microelectronics, the physical limitations have actually been diminishing. On the other hand, people's attitudes on PwDs seem to have remained at the traditional level. It is the purpose of my present article to point out how some of these attitudes affect the integration process, and to make suggestions as to how they may be overcome.

Before we look at the attitudes, let us make one position clear.

When we talk about integration, there is a question often raised, especially by able-bodied decision makers. Would PwDs be better off if they live together in a special home, attend special schools, and work in sheltered workshops? They would not have to suffer the same frustrating or intimidating experience that they face in an able-bodied society.

Experience in integration programs shows that PwDs do have difficulties and frustrations at times, just as their able-bodied counterparts. However, given the choice, most integrated PwDs do not want to go back to a sheltered society. This justifies the need for integration more than any theoretical argument. Given this preamble, let us now turn to the attitudes of various people who shape our integration process.

We live in a work-oriented community. In order to be fully integrated, PwDs must be able to obtain employment and make themselves financially independent. What are the attitudes of employers? General surveys show that employers tend to regard PwDs collectively as people having subnormal intelligence and limited training, and people who can only do simple or unskilled work. Given this view, therefore, employers consider PwDs unsuitable for the keen competition in the open market. To solve this problem, it would be best to publicize the employers who have already recruited PwDs. This would give a chance for the employers to express their first-hand experience of the abilities of PwDs. It would also enable the rehabilitation service to show their appreciation of these employers.

Another concern is the absenteeism of PwDs. This is often expressed by employers who have never recruited any PwDs. Would PwDs be less physically fit and, therefore, more likely to be absent from the job? To answer this question, we must first understand that physical disability is not in contradictory terms with physical fitness. Second, it has been found that absenteeism is more connected with the loss of morale rather than of physical fitness. In fact,

employers who have actually appointed PwDs find that they are more loyal to companies than the average workers. This is because PwDs realize that their job mobility, or the chance of switching to another job, is considerably less than others.

To allay another worry of employers, accident rates of PwDs are found to be less than the overall average, probably because PwDs are careful not to cause a second disabling incident in their lives. Hence, employers must have a word with the actuaries in their insurance companies to alleviate their concern.

Despite the statistics, however, some insurance policies *do* have a clause stating that the insured persons must not suffer from any physical deformity or mental illness. They make use of this clause to overcharge customers with a disability. Such practices should either be regulated by the government, or made known to the public so that employers could turn to other insurance companies that have more reasonable premium rates.

Managers also complain about the onset cost of special facilities for PwDs, such as computer braille terminals and accessible toilets. Actually, some of these are general facilities recommended by the building code anyway. Others may be the needs of individual employees. We recommend that the government should provide tax relief or special subsidies to such facilities in order to encourage the recruitment of more PwDs.

Another important area that we must look at is the attitudes of rehabilitation professionals. It has been some years since we tried to avoid giving discriminating labels to PwDs. Words like “cases” have been deleted from the professionals’ dictionaries and replaced by words like “clients” or “service users”. I had been happy to be referred to as a client, until recently when I was asked to produce a position paper on the International Year of Disabled Persons. When the paper was translated into another language, the word “clients” became “beneficiaries”, or someone receiving an aid or a handout, because this was what the journalists thought the clients were after. We find that, even though a change of labels can help, it may be superficial and the fundamental concepts may be firmly set in people’s minds.

Furthermore, when people are struck by a disability, they have no idea what the rest of their lives will be like, and most of the self-conceptions are, in fact, casted upon them by the rehabilitation workers. Besides being taught how to take care of themselves, they are given vocational training from a very limited number of choices. If the clients are blind, for instance, they are taught as telephone operators. If they have a physical disability, they are taught electronics.

These choices are the excellent work of innovative professionals early in our rehabilitation history. To copy them may lead to success more easily. There is, however, no reason to believe that they are the only choices for the clients. There are clients who are young and ambitious and who want to try something new. Such people should not be brushed aside as unrealistic. They should be given the chance and the assistance from the rehabilitation workers.

After training, PwDs will have to attend job interviews. They may be bombarded with questions similar to those we have just discussed. The PwDs, who are novices on the job, has neither the competence nor the confidence to answer these questions.

What we need are very understanding rehabilitation workers and placement officers, who have the experience and expertise to deal with these questions. They may meet potential employers before job interviews, so that the confidence of the PwDs will not be challenged first. This is more easily said than done. Very often, except for well-established placements, the placement officers themselves are not very convinced about the PwDs’ potential for filling the jobs. The PwDs are effectively rejected even before job interviews begin.

Thus, the attitudes of rehabilitation professionals are very important. They not only shape the whole rehab process, but help impose attitudes on the minds of PwDs, their families, and potential employers. It is recommended that we should conduct ongoing training sessions and seminar workshops for rehabilitation workers at all levels, especially for those who have been in the trade for so long that they are adversely affected by current practices and prejudice.

Let us now look at PwDs themselves. It is estimated that about 10 percent of the world's population have a disability. This alone is a sufficient reason for making provisions for PwDs. But people's reaction to this estimate is: "Where are the PwDs? I don't see any." There are two main reasons for this:

First, there are already PwDs who have fully integrated into the community. They may be working as professionals or in the factory. They may be married and raising their own families. Many of them no longer want to identify themselves with PwDs, but rather as accountants, teacher, fathers, and so on.

It is to these people that we must make a particular appeal. They have undergone the entire rehabilitation process, have seen the shortcomings, and have managed to overcome the barriers. They are the ideal people to help in the planning or policy-making of services to other PwDs. They see problems that able-bodied decision makers don't. They must make themselves seen and heard.

To quote an example, many architects think that the installation of elevators is the end of the story on physical access to buildings. Blinking lights and bells outside elevators are simply luxurious accessories. But this is not the case for people with hearing or visual impairment, especially if the bells could help differentiate an elevator going up from one going down. Even the people with a physical disability would appreciate the blinking lights because they give an early notice about the approaching elevator. Such simple conveniences are not easily conceivable unless one has firsthand experience of a disability.

A second reason why PwDs are not seen is related to the attitudes of everyday people. In some cultures, young children are taught not to stare at PwDs or to gossip about them. This, however, is not true in other parts of the world. People are left free to make gratuitous remarks and gestures. This is particularly disconcerting to PwDs recovering from a disabling incident and, hence, most vulnerable. As a result, they want to stay invisible and withdrawn from society. Thus, the attitudes and behavior of everyday people is a big concern.

Most people do not normally have a chance to meet enough PwDs to understand them. Their impressions are given by stereotypes portrayed by the media, or handed down from the older generations. It has been found, unfortunately, that when PwDs appear on television series, fiction, or children's story books, they are usually portrayed as a victim or a villain. This tendency is in fact rising because criminal behavior in fiction today is frequently attributed to mental disorder of one form or another. We hope that the mass media can, instead, do more investigative reporting on the life of PwDs and present the other side of the story.

When voluntary agencies ask for contributions, their descriptions of PwDs also affect the attitudes of everyday people. PwDs are portrayed as very dependent. They need sympathy and, therefore, donations. Actually, a more positive attitude would be to ask for understanding and assistance, so that PwDs could live an independent life.

To summarize, the smooth integration of PwDs into society must be a joint effort of rehabilitation professionals, employers, the media, and the PwDs themselves. Their attitudes can alter the entire integration process. We sincerely hope that everyone's mind is on the right track.