

More effort is needed to build an inclusive society for the 'differently abled' in the city

Located on the ground floor of one of those massive buildings in the new Central Government Complex at Tamar is a coffee shop with a difference, for it is entirely staffed by the "differently abled". Overlooking Tamar Park as it does, it has both outside and inside seating, and the young staff there are very solicitous in looking after their customers. On a recent cold day there, they came around constantly to refill tea and coffee cups with fresh hot water. This is something which does not always happen at even the most posh eating establishments elsewhere.

It is one of the many very worthwhile social enterprises set up by the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals — which is justly famous for its myriad of long-established educational, health and social services. Other branches of iBakery can be found in Kennedy Town and at the University of Hong Kong. All credit to the organizers, and to the hard-working disabled people who work there!

This enclave of inclusiveness, situated in the very heart of our government complex, offers a shining example to others in terms of giving the disabled a chance to hold a job, and thereby to enhance self-worth and dignity and to contribute to society and earn a living. Indeed, the government service of Hong Kong is one of the few large employers here offering a range of opportunities for work to our disabled citizens, and deserves much credit for taking that enlightened and inclusive approach. Many of the civil servants working at Tamar are disabled.

In many other developed economies, the regrettable but commonly found reluctance of many employers to offer jobs to the differently abled, thereby denying them a chance to show what they can do, is addressed by having a mandated quota system for employers to fulfill. All large employers are obliged



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to have a certain minimum percentage of their jobs held by disabled people. Thus, big firms have to take the trouble to actively seek ways to find work opportunities to offer to that sector of their populace who are suffering from certain degrees of mental or physical handicap.

In a kinder world, such legal requirements would not have been made legally mandatory, as jobs would automatically be offered to a diverse range of people based on merit. Experience has shown that many differently abled employees try harder at work to compensate for their shortcomings. But the sad reality is that enforcing a quota system is presently the main way that these handicapped, but just as capable, workers are not ignored. This quota system should be introduced widely in conjunction with public education on how these people can be absorbed into the workplace to the greater benefit of all.

A similarly laudable exercise in reaching out to the differently abled was reported on in this newspaper's culture page recently (on Nov 11). The British Council's joint effort, together with the Hong Kong government's Leisure and Cultural Services Department, resulted in a modern take on a Shakespeare play being staged here with differently abled performers from Scotland and Hong Kong. Birds of Paradise Theatre Company from Glasgow goes the extra mile to make their production widely accessible to differently abled audiences, too. The

language barrier is comprehensively addressed; the visually impaired could take a touch tour of the set; and sign language was provided for the deaf.

For this city's disabled citizens, landing a job sadly remains but a pipe dream for most of them. But even for those fortunate enough to be able to find potential employment, if they cannot readily make the commute to work, it means nothing. I am referring here to the numerous physical barriers found all around this teeming city. These represent an insurmountable obstacle for access to many commercial and public facilities. Such obstacles as uneven walkways, staircases without handrails, stalls blocking the sidewalk, buildings without lifts, and many lampposts, trees and other impediments situated in the middle of pavements are commonly found here. All these present a barrier not only to the disabled, but also to the blind, the sick, the frail, and to the elderly among us.

Hong Kong's world-renowned MTR service is very well geared-up to providing ready access to the disabled. Unfortunately, such effective and caring provision is not found universally in our other forms of public transport; or, indeed, in numerous other types of building here. Arranging for wider ready access for the disabled to all areas of Hong Kong is a goal worth addressing for the sake of offering inclusiveness to the whole community.

With the International Day for Persons with Disabilities being marked on Saturday (Dec 3), let us hope that a much higher proportion of Hong Kong organizations and companies will emulate the fine examples mentioned above, by facilitating access and reaching out to give more of our disabled brothers and sisters a chance to show what they can do. Doing so would go a long way toward building a more inclusive society for those who are physically or mentally challenged here in Hong Kong.

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