



iBakery production supervisor Fred Leung teaches Vincent Ho the art of making matcha cakes; Ho with the finished product (above left); worker Tsui Man-leung and trainee Lo Kwok-wai (left) at the iBakery Cafe. Photos: Edmond So, Jonathan Wong

More like a care service than a step towards employment, sheltered workshops mean a lifetime of inadequate pay for people with disabilities. Can social enterprises offer a better solution, asks Bernice Chan

GIVE AND TAKE

It's a dilemma that families grapple with when their children have serious disabilities: what to do after they grow up and are too old for school? Thankfully for Kwok Wai-chun, her son Vincent Ho Wing-sun has managed to get a job at iBakery, a social enterprise run by the charity Tung Wah Group of Hospitals. "He says he's like his father and needs to work," she says with a chuckle.

Although 26-year Ho has Down's syndrome, he has been learning new skills at iBakery. His latest assignment is to make matcha tea cakes, a new item, and he watches attentively as production manager Leung Shiu-fai fills a piping bag with batter and injects even amounts into a few loaf tins. Ho then continues the task, filling rows of tins.

The enterprise sells its cakes and pastries to companies as corporate gifts, and at a pop-up stand in the Hopewell Centre, its shop in Kennedy Town and its cafe at Tamar, which also employs people with disabilities. The matcha pound cakes are introduced not just to boost sales but also raise awareness about workers like Ho.

More than half of iBakery's 60 employees are people with various kinds of disabilities,

mental and physical. Because of that, they focus on pastries that are easy to make and involve simple decorations. Nevertheless, the items sell quite well and, coupled with concessionary rents at some outlets, the venture has stayed in the black.

Thanks to his cheery smile, Ho has become the "face" of iBakery, his photo appearing on the bakery's promotional material. He earns about HK\$6,000 a month as a full-time employee (based on minimum wage of HK\$32.50 per an hour), and receives standard benefits such medical care and annual leave.

Chan regularly receives inquiries from families about whether there might be a job in iBakery for their child.

The most important criteria are that the candidate must be willing to learn and be fit enough to be able to stay on their feet eight hours, says Chan, who is also assistant superintendent at Tung Wah's rehabilitation centre in Aberdeen. After clearing that hurdle, they are given up to three weeks' of training, not only to see if they are suitable for the job but also whether they like it.

The pay and conditions at iBakery are enviable compared to most work schemes for adults with disabilities.

More than 11,000 people are engaged in nine programmes supported by the Social Welfare Department, which range from sheltered workshops to vocational training and work extensions. Applicants must be assessed by a social worker before getting a placement, a process that usually requires one to two years but can take up to a decade for some.

Work conditions vary among the 34 sheltered workshops listed on the department website. Those run by St James' Settlement charity are among the most sought-after, including its newest workshop on Kennedy Road in Wan Chai, which opened last July.

Large windows allow plenty of natural light into the two-storey space, which is sectioned off according to the participants' ability. On one floor, some fold letters, others stuff envelopes or stick labels before the material is packed into boxes and sent to the post office.

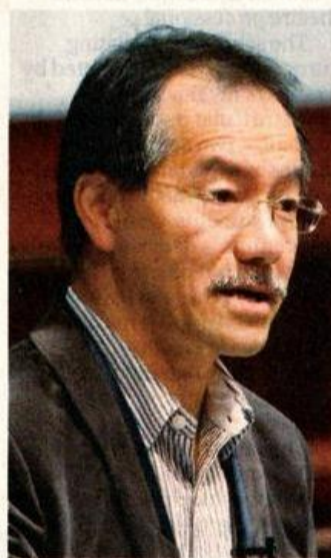
Upstairs, those with more nimble fingers help in upcycling projects, making speakers out of plastic containers, sewing felt laptop covers, or making wallets out of wallpaper.

Not surprisingly, productivity varies; workshop participants include people in their 70s who can't do much but have joined the programme since St James' Settlement opened its first sheltered workshop in 1973.

But as long as they show up, all are paid HK\$26.50 per day regardless of ability or whether they do any work. The rate is by no means a living wage but an improvement on two years ago, when it was just HK\$21.

The workshops are run as part of rehabilitation services that the government has contracted out to welfare groups, which are instructed to give the payment as an "incentive" to people with disability, says St James' Settlement service manager Cheryl Cheung Man-wing.

If the group wanted to pay extra to individuals who work harder or are more productive



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FERNANDO CHEUNG (ABOVE), LEGISLATOR

and bring their earnings up to a few thousand dollars a month, it would have to secure more business, she adds.

That means ensuring their products meet market standards, so St James' business manager Terry Chan Ka-yu works with local designers to create easily assembled consumer items so that its sheltered workshops can deliver good quality products.

Regarded as trainees rather than employees, participants in sheltered workshops are not given benefits such as paid leave or contributions towards a Mandatory Provident Fund account. Still, there is long list of people waiting to get into those run by St James' Settlement. "Families think this is a

decent service, a safe place for their children to do vocational training," Cheryl Cheung says.

Labour Party legislator Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung acknowledges that people with disabilities may have a hard time fitting into regular work environments.

That's why Cheung isn't opposed to the concept of sheltered workshops. "People with disabilities often need a more protective environment designed for them," he says.

However, he is concerned that the work they do in sheltered workshops isn't fully recognised when the government calibrates its subsidies to NGOs.

"It's good to have an inclusive environment, but that's usually not possible, especially when we're in a place that is so oriented to profit making."

As a result, people attending sheltered workshops may be charged for items ranging from air conditioning to meals, outdoor activities and field trips.

The jobs they undertake in the workshops depend very much on the creativity and initiative of the staff, says Cheung, a lecturer on welfare policy and services at Polytechnic University.

"It's a transitional arrangement where they are treated as trainees. They are supposed to eventually get jobs, but only a small fraction actually do," he says. "The majority stay there for their entire lives."

Nevertheless, there are a handful of success stories such as the Tiptop Training Centre, which teaches people with disabilities practical skills such as Chinese typing, data entry and interview techniques.

Tiptop's manager, Annie Cheng Tsui-hung, says trainees are assessed annually by social workers and trainers, who meet with the parents to discuss what progress their child has made. And each year, there have been a couple of people who manage to get jobs in normal work settings.

"But the employer needs to be patient and have empathy for it to work," Cheng says.

Although people with disabilities may not be as productive as others, Cheng says the rate HK\$26.50 per day is far from adequate.

"They really do work, and work hard, but they don't make enough to retire. But even though we give so little [money], many people still line up for the chance to join our service," she says.

Similarly, people wait for years to get into St James' sheltered workshops; to Cheryl Cheung, this shows just how lacking the government has been in supporting such programmes, let alone helping them make a living.

Fernando Cheung argues that the government must take the lead and set a quota for hiring people with disabilities, as China, Japan, Taiwan and some European countries have done.

"The government is not sincere in hiring people with disabilities. They think this is a minority issue, and deep down they believe hiring these people means losing efficiency," he says.

In this situation, Cheung believes social enterprises are the way to help people with disabilities make a decent living.

Still, these businesses will need support in the form of government contracts to be sustainable. Public institutions such as universities, libraries and museums should allocate space to enable social enterprises to flourish.

"It's more important

to implement policies to help them sustain themselves. For example, by renting premises at a lower rate. Corporations should also devote a percentage of their budget to hiring or buying from social enterprises," says Cheung.

"People with disabilities need that recognition and dignity to get reasonable compensation – they may not be as productive, but, in the spirit of capitalism, it encourages everyone to do their best." bernice.chan@scmp.com

St James' Settlement managers Cheryl Cheung (right) and Terry Chan.



In the workshop at St James' Settlement. Photos: K.Y. Cheng