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## The Dignity of Work and the Problems Faced by the Handicapped During Employment

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**After a discussion which was held at the Rehabilitation Centre for the Physically Handicapped amongst eight employed members, we found out that there are certain points which merit being broached during this Seminar. These individuals are employed as follows: three as unskilled labourers, one as a skilled labourer and four doing clerical work. Their standard of education varies from Special and Primary education level to Secondary education in normal schools. Ages vary from twenty three to forty-six years, while their disabilities differ. Both sexes are represented.**

When a disabled person finishes school like any other person, he starts seeking a job in order to reap the fruits of his studies and trainings. He also begins to yearn for the need to be financially independent. But work must be dignified. First of all we believe that handicapped persons should have the same access to job opportunities like other people. This means that handicapped persons should not be offered only work which is discarded by others; or that when they are offered work - any kind of work - this should consist of some particular part of a job which is tedious in nature while the rest of the job is done by others. This amounts to shabby treatment and in no way does it satisfy the concept of dignified work.

On the other hand, in order for work to assume dignity, it must convey to these persons the satisfaction of being able to sustain themselves through their own capabilities; without being dependent on anybody - neither the state nor their own families. After all this is the right of every individual, and therefore of the handicapped as well. At this point it must be borne in mind that we must offer to the handicapped equality and full participation in society.

## **Preparation for Dignified Employment**

Naturally, like everybody else, a handicapped person requires training and the necessary level of education prior to starting his working life. These have to start being given as early as possible, or from the time the disability occurs; at first by the parents and then (in collaboration with the parents) in a normal or special school. Vocational training and counselling are needed because these services help the handicapped to discover his/her capabilities.

### **First Problems**

When a handicapped person starts looking for a job s/he encounters difficulties and disappointments. S/he starts filling in applications for work, then, after being accepted on the merits of his/her qualifications, s/he learns during the interview that s/he cannot qualify because of his/her disability, even if this is minimal. This is intimated to him either verbally, where the employer explains to him/her in very plain terms the reason why s/he is not going to be engaged, or by a very telling facial expression.

We reaffirm that the employer should not take into consideration only the disability of a person, but rather the capabilities he possesses. "So here we implore: "Give us a chance to prove ourselves". After all there is the probation period for the employer to judge if this or that person can or cannot fulfil his/her duty.

The employer should not feel embarrassed if, after the probation period of a disabled person, he thinks he should tell that particular person that his/her output level falls short of the normal requirements. However, this must be the real reason and not because that person is handicapped. We maintain that a handicapped person resents the fact that s/he is not given the chance to prove him/herself. And this is so because we are not asking for favours but that which is ours by right.

On several occasions when an employer engages a disabled person he discovers that this person is most industrious, does not abstain from work capriciously or linger around. Besides all this, the quality of work produced by a handicapped person is always found to be of a high standard, because these people work on every job with self pride. Many employers think that once we are in employment we are prone to report sick very often because we can always count on our disability as an excuse. This is not so because on our part we will be trying our best to show that we are as capable and as fit as anybody else. Infact we take the least number of 'sick leave' days every year.

Besides, an employer must not be apprehensive or fear that the other workers will not like working with a handicapped person. Initially there will be some who will manifest their objections by trying to ignore the handicapped person, but not all

workers are like that, and these individuals will eventually change their minds. When they realise that we are as capable as they are in carrying out our duties, they will automatically quell their fears of having to carry out our work for us. In most cases we end up by helping them in their work.

There are people who think that we are always moody or gloomy; but soon these same people will learn that in reality this is not so because we are not sick people, but people who can live with, and accept the condition we find ourselves in. Here it must be admitted that our friends and workmates have a lot to learn from us. We can joke, be happy and speak about different topics like everybody else, so in a short space of time we are integrated with the other workers. These in turn will become good friends and will want to help us by picking some object for us or lifting anything which is too heavy for us. On our part we should avoid broaching the subject of illness and/or handicaps in order to maintain a relaxed atmosphere.

### **Problems at Work**

Now we come to the problems and difficulties faced by some of our members at work. A common problem is that of accessibility to the place of work. I suggest that ramps be constructed so as to enable wheelchair bound persons to apply readily for certain jobs, as inaccessibility is one of the reasons that keep handicapped persons from applying for work.

We had a particular case where a person's job was being continuously changed. As soon as he showed signs of getting used to the type of work he was doing, his job was changed to another and consequently it became impossible for him to acquaint himself fully to one particular job. Eventually he was constricted to quit. On paper it would seem that it was he who had relinquished his post and not the employer who had sacked him. It must be stated that this sort of treatment may completely discourage such a worker. Here we have an example where a disabled person is being given unfair treatment for the simple reason that s/he has a physical handicap.

Another case concerns an employee whose job entailed some strenuous work. His employer gave him instructions to carry out that part of the job which did not involve any physical stress and leave the rest to the others. This agreement wasn't to his liking, however, because he felt, that he should carry out a job from start to finish, as in this way he would be fully satisfied with his work. Here we find a case of genuine love for one's work, where this employee wishes to do a job completely by himself. However, on the other hand, he should bear in mind that his employer is responsible for his welfare. Perhaps in this case both the employer and the employee should discuss together if the latter should or should not do that particular job. Here we see the importance of dialogue between employers and workers.

## **Some Positive Points**

We do not want to give the impression that there do not exist jobs where our workers are not treated as they should be, like anybody else. Here we have a normal working life like all other workers. In such an environment the handicapped forgets that s/he has a disablement. The other workers also will forget about it. They will all work together for the benefit of the company or factory which employs them.

We have certain places of work where the owner or manager finds time to discuss with handicapped workers those personal problems they encounter from time to time. It is only through dialogue that mutual assistance and co-operation are possible. In those cases where this exists we often find that certain employment conditions have been modified to suit these individuals, in order that they might carry out their duty to the satisfaction of all concerned. An example is time-keeping, where concessions were granted for individuals to attend regular treatment in hospitals. Some employers provide transport to and from work. We even know of cases where special lifts were installed for these persons.

Here we would like to remind these workers that they should be prepared to make known and discuss their difficulties because employers may not always be aware of them. Besides, these meetings serve to strengthen existing industrial relations. We would like to see similar situations at more of our places of work.

## **Duties for Dignity in Employment**

From these few remarks we can see that for work to be dignified there exist certain duties to be carried out: firstly by parents; then by children in co-operation with their educators and parents; by employers; and employees. Parents should make every sacrifice to give their children the highest level of education and training. When these students start looking for a job their parents shouldn't discourage them. Experience has shown that a handicapped person takes longer to find permanent employment, but when he does find it he carries out his duties in an exemplary manner to all the other workers. So courage and strong determination are two essential prerequisites.

The disabled must pay heed to his parents' and teachers' warnings, appreciating that these are meant for his own good. When he finds employment, after the various difficulties he has experienced, s/he must work scrupulously and as best s/he can.

The employer must always bear in mind the integrity of the person he is dealing with. Physical defects should never in any way eclipse a person's prospects. This principle forms the basis of every ideal working place environment.

### **The Mentally Retarded**

Before I conclude I think we ought to remember the intellectually disabled people. These can also give their contribution provided they are assigned duties which are in the sphere of their capabilities. What we can do in concrete terms is to look around us and find the right types of jobs for these people. Obviously, before putting them on the job, we have to provide them with intensive training; on the job. We have to provide them with more supervision. When their capabilities are such that they would fit better in sheltered workshops, then they should be assigned work in these workshops; and thus they too will be integrated in everyday working life.

So, it is only when a handicapped person is looked upon with respect like any other person and given the work which s/he merits that we can say that employment of a handicapped person is a statement of dignity.