

# Hands-on

## Experience Learning

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LEADERS

GADRA Advice and Community Work

## The same but different ... mediating meaningful employment for persons with disabilities

It is estimated that roughly one billion of the world's population experience some form of disability and that "persons with disabilities, on average as a group, are more likely to experience adverse socioeconomic outcomes than persons without disabilities, such as less education, worse health outcomes, less employment, and higher poverty rates."<sup>1</sup>

In South Africa, it is difficult to accurately profile our disabled population. Official statistics do "not include statistics on children under the age of five or on persons with psychosocial and certain neurological disabilities due to data limitations, and should therefore not be used for purposes of describing the overall disability prevalence or profile of persons with disabilities in South Africa."<sup>2</sup>

At a policy level, this obviously calls into question how South African legislation, policies and programmes need to be shaped to ensure that inequalities are not perpetuated. However, at community level, what this means is that persons with disabilities often have few options but to rely on local support structures to address their needs. The Grahamstown Area Distress Relief Association Advice and Community Work (GADRA), is one such organisation. Established in 1958 and, therefore, one of the Eastern Cape's oldest surviving NGOs, our organisation's primary activities have always

been community-focused, community-driven and geared towards aiding people who are poor and marginalised. These include persons with disabilities. Here, we reflect on our increasing role as an employment mediation partner and provide recommendations for the role that industry might play in facilitating "best-fit" employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

### ***GADRA's approach ... engage, consult, identify needs and plan realistically***

Central to our approach is the emphasis that we place on actively engaging persons with disabilities. Thereby, we offer them the opportunity to be consulted, to be involved in identifying common needs and importantly, to be key decision makers in planning realistic action plans to address these needs. Our approach, therefore, shifts away from developing static programmes which often have a defined focus and which – while very important – tend to offer little by way of opportunities for continuing personal growth and development. So, as an organisation, we have veered away from treating persons with disabilities as "special"; requiring unique solutions and separate from mainstream interventions. Instead, we acknowledge that while the needs of persons with disabilities may be specialised when it comes to health, transport and social grants – and there are organisations which focus on the provision of assistive devices, accessing of grants, and housing, and so on – their aspirations of economic independence, participation, gaining education and skills are the same as any other

<sup>1</sup> World Bank. 2011. *Main report. Vol. 1 of World report on disability*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2011/01/14440066/world-report-disability>

<sup>2</sup> Statistics South Africa - Census 2011: *Profile of persons with disabilities in South Africa, 2014*. <http://beta2.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-01-59/Report-03-01-592011.pdf>

individual. Through our Sinakho programme, therefore, we try to provide the fundamentals to achieving these goals by

- increasing access to relevant information
- developing critical work skills, and
- providing support in finding the best fit employment for our programme partners (or participants).

Annually, roughly 250 individuals participate in our Entrepreneurship Development, Employment Opportunities and Income Generating Projects. On average, 25-30% go on to obtain gainful employment, 10% establish their own income generating projects/businesses and a few go on to pursue tertiary studies.



***On being an employment mediation partner – we can't do this on our own***

In many respects, increasing access to relevant information and developing critical work skills are the easier aspects of our work; we are in control of what we can provide and what we can do. Supporting and finding “best-fit” employment for our programme partners presents far more

of a challenge as it requires that we invest an enormous amount of time and effort into facilitating mutually beneficial relationships with opportunity providers. One such example is the collaboration which we have successfully established with the Biological Control Research Unit at Rhodes University’s Department of Zoology and Entomology. The Unit sought to involve individuals from the community in the development and implementation of an insect mass rearing project, as a strategy for the biological control of invasive aquatic weeds. This approach requires that a vast range of insects are produced and collected; work that all parties immediately recognised as offering no obvious insurmountable challenges for persons with disabilities.

As an employment mediation partner, GADRA facilitated contact between its programme partners and the University. In turn, the University developed and ran a knowledge building and training course for the GADRA group, which introduced the basic ecology of invasive species and practise of biological control of aquatic weeds. On completion of the course, three people from this group were employed by the University and now ensure that the mass-rearing facility is one of the most productive and effective of its kind in the country. Their success is measured by the number of insects collected and released. This year, this figure exceeded 80 000 insects that were used to defend against invasive water plants in three African countries and five South African provinces. More importantly, however, is that this partnership has resulted in an ongoing training opportunity which prepares persons with disabilities for employment opportunities, elsewhere. Recently, the University facilitated the replication of this employment model into the City of Cape Town’s Invasive Species programme under the Environmental Resource Management Department. Training was provided to a group of persons with disabilities, two of whom have since been employed using Expanded Public Works Programme funding.

***What lies ahead? The slog work of replication***

Without doubt, our biggest challenge is the low **uptake of persons with disabilities as employees**. South Africa’s Employment Equity 2013/2014 report revealed that persons with disabilities accounted for 0.9% of all employees

in 2013. While South Africa's Commission for Employment Equity believes this figure might not be an accurate reflection as not all employers report effectively, this figure does appear to be far off the 2% target for 2015 set by Government for the Public Service.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in thinking about whether an opportunity might exist here for young persons with disabilities to step into this vacuum, we need to be mindful of the Special Needs Education Survey conducted in 2012. This survey showed that currently in excess of 110 000 learners are attending special schools in South Africa. Representing only 33.6% of the total number of children of school going age with disabilities in the country, what this means is that more than **60 percent of children with disabilities are not registered to receive an education** in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> While the Department of Higher Education and Training's Green Paper for Post-school Education and Training has since acknowledged the need to develop an enabling and empowering environment across the system for staff and students with disabilities, no significant progress has been made to date, leaving very limited opportunities for the majority of South Africa's disabled youth, post school-going age.

### *Facilitating the employment of persons with disabilities. Is there a specific role for industry?*

It seems clear to us that a huge effort is required to facilitate the uptake of persons with disabilities as sought-after employees. Based on our experience as an employment mediation partner, we have seen huge strides being made when industry partners pro-actively embrace this practise. In particular, we have seen that

- **Executive buy-in is crucial.** What this generally means is that executive management has to actively earmark an advertised position for an employee with a disability, as vital. Very often, this relies on executive management being able to appreciate/acknowledge a business case of having employees with disabilities. These include
  - building a reputation as an employer of choice;
  - ensuring that their brand speaks to all



potential employees (including disabled persons), thereby increasing their market share to the disabled population and possibly attracting potential investors;

- actively promoting diversity in the workplace; building a reputation as a progressive and inclusive company while fostering staff and team enrichment;
  - meeting compliance to Employment Equity Legislation and BEE Codes.
- **Regular job analyses are helpful.** Reviewing requirements for the job and distinguishing between essential and desirable requirements are hugely helpful. Job requirements often act as unnecessary barriers and could easily be relaxed. Requiring less experience, acknowledging non-mainstream educational qualifications, and/or not requiring a driver's license, are just some examples of where requirements might be reviewed. It seems to be good practice for management to sign-off on job profiles each time a position is advertised, as this provides a renewed opportunity to signal buy-in from executive management to do things differently.
  - **Recruitment and interview strategies can be flexible.** Open-style recruitment and interview processes create safe spaces for candidates to disclose their disability and to identify barriers early on in the recruitment process. This saves time and allows both parties to think collectively about how specific needs might be accommodated.
  - **Training of candidates might be useful.** If training is not expensive, train a group of

<sup>3</sup> The Commission on Employment Equity Report 2013/2014. <http://www.labour.gov.za/DOL/documents/annual-reports/Commission%20for%20Employment%20Equity%20Report/2013-2014/commission-for-employment-equity-report-2013-2014/>

<sup>4</sup> Twenty Year Review South Africa 1994 – 2014 Background Paper: Disability [http://access.tech.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/12%20Disability\\_20YR.pdf](http://access.tech.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/12%20Disability_20YR.pdf)

candidates. This will refine training techniques, expose more individuals to the workplace and help with making a decision about whom to appoint.

- **Hiring, retaining and supporting staff require work and effort.** Once the best candidate has been identified it is crucial that the role, remuneration package, conditions of services etc., are discussed in detail. Discuss any reasonable accommodations with the employee and commit to reviewing these regularly. This support may be provided by a mediating organisation for both the employer and employee so that social issues experienced by persons with disabilities are appropriately addressed and understood. In other cases, a trusted colleague or workers’ forum can also play this role.
- **Awareness training for all staff is non-negotiable.** Ultimately, executive management holds responsibility for ensuring that staff in all departments in the organisation are aware of, and understand, the needs of employees with disabilities in order to ensure his/her inclusion in the usual operations of the

company. While this might involve providing some training, other mechanisms - such as setting up a buddy system - might also be necessary and worth considering.

**Conclusion**

Given South Africa’s high unemployment rate, finding employment is hugely challenging for all job seekers. For young people entering the job market, preparing an application, travelling to the city to drop off their curriculum vitae and “selling” themselves in an interview, can be hugely overwhelming. These same transitions need to be navigated by persons with disabilities. But, for young and old, additional obstacles often stand in their way. In a context where able-bodied people appear to be favoured as employees, it seems increasingly imperative that we continue to i) re-think and promote strategies on how access to employment by persons with disabilities might be facilitated, and ii) how current recruitment and in-service support practices might be reshaped to pave the way for more equitable access and representation of persons with disabilities in the workplace. This might just be simpler to do than we think.

**This learning brief tells of the hands-on experience of:**



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The DG Murray Trust encourages its implementing partners to share their experiences and learning in the form of a Hands-on learning brief. Download guidelines on writing a Hands-on brief from <http://www.dgmt.co.za/what-we-learned/>  
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