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Employment of People with Disabilities

From Traditional Concept of Sheltered Employment to Creating New Employment Initiatives for People with Disabilities

Grace Chan

Director of the Hong Kong Society for the Blind

INTRODUCTION

Employment is important in the total rehabilitation process. Realizing this, since its establishment in 1956, the Hong Kong Society For the Blind has been embarking on a variety of vocational services to help the visually impaired to regain self confidence and dignity in their work life.

A HISTORICAL REVIEW

Sheltered Employment for the Visually Impaired

As a start, conventional type of vocational training and sheltered work employment had been our major services between 1950s and 1960s. The making of rattan baskets, brooms, and chinks and the polishing of buttons were the initial products that could be handled by the visually impaired. Some in-service training, of course, was rendered to the visually impaired workers before they engaged in the production in the form of sheltered employment. Wages were very low. Yet they could still maintain a living by getting financial assistance from Government.

Commencement of Vocational Training

Entering the 1970s, with a fast growing economy, lots of jobs were available in the open market. Although the blind could not work with sight, they were able to work with their ears. Hence switchboard operation became a popular job among the visually impaired. In view that vocational training was important to enhance the employability of the visually impaired in the open market, starting from the 70s, the Society formally launched a number of vocational training courses for

the visually impaired. They included piano-tuning, massage training and telephony. As technical aids were still not very popular among the visually impaired at that time due to the high cost, jobs available for the visually impaired in open employment had been limited to piano-tuning, massage and switchboard operation. Among the three, massage was not so well received by the visually impaired as it had been associated with some vice business.

The 1977 White Paper marked the Milestone

In 1977, the first White Paper on Rehabilitation titled 'Integrating the Disabled into the Community : A United Effort' laid down Government's policy on rehabilitation. The White Paper clearly spelt out the Government's intention and commitment to better coordinate all rehabilitation services pursued by both governmental and non-governmental organisations and to provide a series of cohesive services to the disabled to develop their potentials to the fullest extent. Apart from setting up the office of Commissioner for Rehabilitation for service coordination, government's support in terms of financial resources recorded an increasing commitment since the 1980s. In addition to expanding services in prevention, medical rehabilitation and special education, vocational rehabilitation also received great attention. To cite a few, vocational assessment services, skills centres for the disabled, technical aids services and employment services in the form of selective placement were established one after the other in the 80s.

In line with the trend, there had been significant changes in vocational rehabilitation services for the visually impaired in Hong Kong that engineered mainly through our Hong Kong Society for the Blind (HKSB). The Workshop for the Blind which was established in 1963 under the auspices of the Hong Kong Society for the Blind was renamed as the Factory for the Blind in 1978. Production lines were entirely changed from producing primitive items to more sophisticated products. Woodwork, machine sewing, paper boxes and filing tags sections were established since then. More than a hundred visually impaired workers were employed. Besides, other disabled workers such as the ex-mentally ill, the mentally retarded and the deaf were employed as co-workers to share in the production line with the visually impaired. Such a change indicated that the Factory for the Blind was no longer providing sheltered employment to the disabled. With the installation of more machines, and automation of certain production process, we became capable of competing on equal footing with factories employing sighted workers in the open market. Our annual sales had increased from 3.1 million Hong Kong dollars in 1977/78 to 17 million Hong Kong dollars in 1994/95. Our Factory workers are currently earning an average monthly wage of \$2,500, about 4 times that of those working in ordinary sheltered workshops. It is apparent that given adequate support and the opportunity to develop their potentials, the disabled workers can be as productive as their abled counterparts.

The First Vocational Training Centre for the Visually Impaired

To equip the more educated visually impaired with sophisticated job skills so as to enrich their choice of jobs in open employment, in 1978, the Pokfulam Vocational Training Centre was opened by the Society. A series of courses were launched, including Office Reception Practice, Braille Stenography, Audio typing, Metal Work and Machine Shop, Joinery, Automobile repair and Industrial Sewing. Before 1987, the HKSB was the sole agency to offer vocational training to the visually impaired in Hong Kong. When the Vocational Training Council (VTC) took over most of the vocational training courses launched by NGOs in 1987, the Pokfulam Vocational Training Centre under the HKSB had to close down. As a result of such a transfer, some of the courses previously run by the Society were suspended, only leaving Office Reception Practice and Industrial Sewing courses available to the visually impaired in the Skills Centres for the Disabled of VTC.

Job Revolution for the Visually Impaired in Open Market

Entering into the late 1980s, we witnessed fast development of braille display computer aids that greatly facilitated the visually impaired, the totally blind in particular, in both study and work. Competition among manufacturers in North America, Australia and Europe to get hold of the visually impaired target users has indirectly reduced the costs and prices of the products making the target users benefit the most. The availability of modern technical aids that gear towards applications in ordinary job environments has fostered the opening up of new job opportunities for the visually impaired in the job market. Although the emergence of direct-dial-in system which employs computer technology has reduced the demand for manual telephone operation that has been popular among the visually impaired, the use of computerized technical aids create new job opportunities in computer word processing, taxi paging, paging operation, customer enquiries service, telephone reception and computer operation for the visually impaired.

Into the 90s : Employments Services for the Visually Impaired

Vocational training is only a means to an end. Our ultimate goal of rehabilitation is to help the disabled to reintegrate into the society and become a contributive and independent member. To achieve this end, gainful employment is the gateway. Having got ample experience in working for rehabilitation of the visually impaired, we feel obliged to provide quality employment guidance and placement services for the visually impaired. With the generous support from the Community Chest and the Round Table No. 3, the first Employment Services Unit for the visually impaired was established in September, 1990, as a three-year pilot project. The project aims to boost up the employment rate of the visually impaired and to explore and open up new job opportunities for this client group.

The project team is led by a Placement Coordinator who is assisted by an Assistant Placement Officer and a clerk.

The Placement Coordinator is responsible for the assessment of the job-seekers, liaison with firms and companies to identify new job opportunities for the clients, referral of suitable candidates for positions available and provision of pre-job and on-the-job guidance to the visually impaired employees. The Assistant Placement Officer helps to render coaching sessions for specific job skills, use of technical aids and interviewing techniques and to provide follow-up support to the clients who are placed on jobs. In addition to the normal office routines, the Clerk also involves in job searching activities. She reads recruitment advertisements on newspapers every morning to help clients to gather information about the open job market and to assist clients to prepare resumes and relevant documents for job interviews.

From 1991 to 1993, among the 182 visually impaired job seekers registered for employment services at our Employment Services Unit, 109 of them were successfully placed. Seeing this satisfactory placement result, the Community Chest agreed to support permanently a Placement Coordinator for our Employment Services Unit starting from September, 1993. Up to the end of October, 1995, when this paper is prepared, we have a total of 291 registrants and 180 have succeeded in getting a job in the open market. Their jobs ranges from clerk, enquiries clerk, housekeeper, messenger, office assistant, telephone receptionist to more sophisticated ones such as computer operator, computer programmers, paging operator, telesales, job coach, masseurs, massage instructor and social worker. Apart from placement service, on-site job guidance and work adjustment guidance are rendered to the visually impaired employees, their co-workers and their supervisors.

The provision of job placement and guidance service do not alone account for the success. The provision of supportive services by our other departments increase confidence of both the employers and the visually impaired employees. They are technical aids advisory service, training in the use of technical aids, short-term loan of technical aids for job trials, braille transcription service for job related materials etc.

Meanwhile, promotion and publicity is necessary to increase public acceptance of the work ability of the visually impaired. It also lessens the doubts and removes misunderstandings of the employers and the co-workers of the visually impaired. To achieve this end, massive promotion campaigns had been held from time to time since 1990. In 1993, the first Outstanding Visually Impaired Employees Award was held jointly with the Lions Club of Happy Valley at the City Plaza; one of the most popular shopping mall in Hong Kong. Besides, we also actively participated in employment-related conferences where exhibitions and work demonstrations about the employability of the visually impaired were held. Such promotion campaigns do yield good results. Myths and misunderstandings about the visually impaired are removed and very often some of the employers are

willing to consider job modification to accommodate the visually impaired workers in their work teams.

Nevertheless, our work does not progress without difficulties. The high cost of technical aids very often deters prospective employers from employing the visually impaired. Although the Employaid Fund run by the Hong Kong Society for the Rehabilitation does help the disabled to acquire aids for work to reduce the financial burden of employers employing the disabled, the size of the Fund is very limited which leaves a big service gap.

To compete with the sighted in open employment in commercial field, it is seen as an advantage if the visually impaired do possess qualifications that are recognised by professional bodies. To pursue this end, the Hong Kong Society for the Blind has succeeded in getting approval from the Pitman Examinations Institute to be the second special examination centre for the disabled in Hong Kong in 1993. In fact, we are the first and the only Pitman Examination Centre for the visually impaired so far. Between 1994 and 1995, two Pitman Examination Courses on Computer Word Processing had been launched and a total of eleven visually impaired attended the courses and the Pitman Examination afterwards. All of them passed the examination and three got distinctions. These results are very encouraging and the qualifications so obtained do help the candidates to pursue further advancement in their career.

An Analysis of the Current Job Market for the Visually Impaired

Coming back to the current job market in Hong Kong, it is worth mentioning that massage has become a promising profession for the visually impaired. In 1989, with support from the China Disabled Persons' Federation in arranging experienced massage instructors from China and financial support from the Community Chest, the first intensive acupuncture and massage training course for the local visually impaired was launched in Hong Kong. Since then, a total of five courses have been conducted, 47 blind masseurs graduated and ten more are now in the Fifth course. Two Massage Instructor training courses had been held in 1990, and 1992 respectively for the local blind masseurs. When they returned to Hong Kong after ten months' instructor training, they helped to take up massage training for local visually impaired people.

Since 1989, the Society has been actively pursued vigorous promotion of acupuncture and massage by the visually impaired in the community. With qualified training, the blind masseurs are generally well-accepted by the general public. Seeing the good result, a number of private parties are interested in this kind of business and since 1990, more than twelve private massage centres employing mainly blind masseurs opened one after the other in the urban areas of Hong Kong. At the time of writing, two more new centres are under planning.

Telephony service is another desirable career for the blind and visually impaired. 60% of the applicants of this category got the jobs and their performance received good appraisals from their superiors. Telephony service does not purely refer to answering incoming telephone calls. Services rendered through telephone contact such as enquiry service, customer service, paging service, taxi-paging service, tele-marketing and tele-counselling etc, all fall in this category. As a matter of fact, two-thirds of the employed applicants grouped under this category are actually engaging in a wide range of such trades. The recent successful placement with a big paging company in Hong Kong demonstrates once again the telephony skills of the visually impaired.

Conclusion

Getting employment is a gateway for people with disabilities to integrate into the society and lead an independent living on their own. The setting up of the Employment Services for the visually impaired, to a large extent, is essential in rendering the necessary assistance to the visually impaired in achieving the above goal. In the past four years, through our conscientious efforts and attempts, we developed different services to meet the employment needs of the visually impaired. On the whole, we witness good achievements by the Employment Services team in job placement, employment guidance and promotion of employment for the visually impaired.

As the society grows, people's social consciousness and social demands are upgraded. The development of technology has been helping the disabled a lot to make their life easier and open employment possible. However, without adequate government support in resources and the chances for equal participation in the society for the disabled, the way forward in terms of developing the potentials of the disabled to the fullest extent and public recognition of their ability to be a contributive member of the society can hardly be achieved. So, as a concluding remark, apart from sharing my experience with you today about the Hong Kong situation, I sincerely hope that no matter you are the NGOs or government officials, you do join me in a united effort to achieve the above goal.