

Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PWD's) in Employment and Education

The environment where I exist as a PWD thrives in a spectrum of different conditions and needs. These must be addressed within the ways of the ones upholding their conditions. These circumstances are the ones that hold back the PWD's.

It is in the diversity of this sector that makes it tricky and very difficult to address. Thus, I picked my sector as a subject of this paper.

As an introduction, Persons with Disabilities or PWD's are people who have physical or psychosocial blocks that hinder them in harnessing their full potential. International laws and treaties have already recognized the specific needs, not "special needs," of this sector. Different kinds of disabilities include psychosocial (bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, clinical depression, HIV, etc.) into which I belong, orthopedic, deaf-mute, blind, and people with specific needs. The laws and treaties uphold their rights to suffrage, good quality of life, education, advocacy & policy participation, and community development.

In the Philippines, there are some benefits for PWD's, including Value Added Tax Exemption, 20% discounts on establishments and transportation, express lanes in banks, ports, and airports, and others. Despite the existence of these benefits, the essentials are not covered--- PWD-sensitive employment and education.

Thus, I will share my experiences, analyses, and proposals about the PWD sector within the wider context of the Philippine setting. Some of these recommendations, if culture-specific, could also be used by other countries.

I, for one, have already experienced discrimination during the hiring processes of companies. Upon seeing that I've had suicidal tendencies or manic issues before I was medicated, they would hold back although I am more than equipped for the jobs I have applied for. I've had two undergraduate degrees and one graduate degree underway, but this hindered me from entering the workforce. I was judged not by my competence, but my condition.

How can I even realize my potential if I'm not even given the opportunity to prove my worth?

This has been the kind of "liability mentality" a corporate mindset has, or a strand of economic theory has. If one is dysfunctional, or costly to maintain, it is not efficient for the company to hire such an individual. The human being, specifically the PWD, is confined as a tool or as a commodity for capitalist consumption.

There is such a concept as "trickle-down" economics. The theory states that as the rich get richer, or specifically, as companies and entities grow financially, so will the poor and the marginalized. But in retrospective, such is not the case. The economic, specifically employment, opportunities for the PWD's are not covered by this theory.

Where is the heart in that? And in this fast-paced world where compassion does not necessarily translate to monetary gains and benefits, how will compassion for our sector make sense?

Compassion makes sense in the sector, numerically, because PWD's would no longer become dependents of governments and international organizations. Thus, they would become more productive in the long

run. The betterment of lives means purchasing power or the ability to acquire goods and services to circulate money in the economy.

It makes good sense, but we must go beyond this statement. We must realize that compassion for PWD's is a right and a responsibility. That judgment, in many ways, hampers their growth as human beings. And their dignity is always on the line. This is the challenge of figures, for them to become unique humane faces that show what reality truly is about.

Apart from the stigma in the workplace in which I have discussed, the conditions of PWD's also hinder them to access education. Their physical, psychosocial, or both states, have taken away such opportunities. It is in education that entitlement, self-worth and social recognition are acquired. Without such training whether for skills, competencies or personal growth, the PWD's cannot realize their potential.

In the educational realm, stigma and condition create a mixture that discriminates PWD's and creates a "double whammy." Apart from what they are going through, they also need to face the glares, the judgment statements, and the underestimations. Thus, for a student living with HIV, for example, the shame and stigma coming from his or her condition hinders him or her to rightful educational opportunities.

The lack of education also creates stigma and shame for most PWD's. Because PWD's do not have the academic training and title, people belittle them, apart from their conditions, as useless in society. Can one just imagine the pain that most PWD's must go through?

Seeing the situation, what could be possible solutions? And where do we begin in changing the mindsets of people?

First, there needs to be a management framework that absorbs PWD's with compassion, competence, tools and awareness.

For instance, I have been entrusted with international positions and representations as a member of my sector by a youth group. Specifically, I will speak about all of these things I have written down to the Government of Germany's symposia about sexual health and reproductive rights within the respect to PWD's. This way, the management framework encouraged me and harnessed my full potential to help fellow PWD's in the international arena.

There is also an NGO existing in my country that caters to the employment of PWD's in the corporate setting---- entailing sensitivity training for co-employees and skills training for the PWD himself or herself. The NGO has already sent PWD's to groceries, call centers, and such.

For the educational sector, they must have the personnel, the compassion, the infrastructure, and a continuous flow of funding. In this manner, fellow students of the PWD will be educated about PWD rights, and a humane approach to the experience of disability. The fellow students will also be tools to educate their peers and their families about PWD sensitivity and awareness.

If blind people have Braille, if the deaf-mute have visual materials, if the orthopedic patients have wheelchairs, ramps, lifts, and rails, and every single person is accommodated by his or her needs (e.g.

ergonomic arrangement of the workplace and the educational sector for PWD's), then PWD's can finally participate not just in the above mentioned, but in society as well. And if people understand that psychosocials need all the technological support they could get to be more objective and accepting about their condition, one should support such endeavor.

To aid in the implementation of such policies, digital technology could also accommodate the specific needs of PWD's. With information and tools within the fingertips of PWD's, a sense of independence and confidence will be given to the sector. Upon building the confidence in the sector, the sector with their specific conditions will be brave enough to face a lot of issues and stigma attached to their physical and psychosocial state. They would also own up to their own struggles and go beyond self-pity and self-hatred.

Technology can integrate and make visible one of the many marginalized sectors, the PWD's. Imagine if they could finally participate in different industries that enhances their physical senses, motor functioning and mental health. A lot of people will be desensitized with the stigma attached to PWD's such as myself when educational materials out of technology (e.g. info-graphics, social media, etc.) will be rolled out to the public. For technology and education, specific members of the sector could no longer mobilize to educational institutions. Thus, home studies could be encouraged by the provision of internet access and computers.

Another benefit of technology is to make visible "functional" PWD's. A lot more people will contribute to the economy not only as wage earners, but also social agents that encourage health, human rights, and education.

Although, as a sociologist, I am fully aware of the repercussions of cultural insensitivity of technology if not done right. It's like saying that you're giving person B what was meant for person A. The technologies should fit not only the felt needs of the people, but also their sensibilities, their tastes, their sense of comfort, and their preferences. There should be different software applications for different types of persons with disabilities within certain places, cities, and regions.

Within the policy level, technology can also help in government transactions and processing PWD papers for employment purposes. Thus, for instance, instead of digital signatures needed for the proposed National ID's of the Philippine Government, thumbmark scanners should be provided to the blind. In cases of employment disputes and abuses, specific technological advances could help both parties (the judiciary and the parties involved, especially the PWD), in communicating their grievances. Any type of digital technology can be used to make the communication process easier and faster, for the speedy delivery of justice. Another right that could be practiced by PWD's through technology is the right to vote. Certain technologies could be innovated per PWD spectrum.

Imagine a world where PWD's are fully accepted, integrated, embraced, and welcomed. As mentioned, it makes sense in all aspects--- economic, physical, mental, social, and cultural. The kind of lens where you see the worth of a person, and not his or her shortcomings, will greatly overhaul the whole employment and educational industry to be welcoming of PWD's.

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