

They have the skills and qualifications. So why can't these disabled people find good jobs?

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SINGAPORE: Former construction company owner Chen Chee Min suffered a stroke in October 2010 which left him paralysed on his left side.

The 59-year-old has had difficulty finding a job following his rehabilitation and learning to walk again. Despite taking the initiative to get retrained, and seeking help from disability organisations, he has only been gainfully employed for one out of the last 10 years.

In Singapore, cases like Mr Chen's are not uncommon. According to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), just 28.6 per cent of resident persons with disabilities (PWDs) aged 15 to 64 are employed.

Another 4.2 per cent of PWDs in this age range were without a job and actively looking for one, said Minister of State for Manpower Zaqu Mohamad last September in Parliament.

Following his stroke, Mr Chen spent time mostly at home, rehabilitating himself. In 2016, he signed up for an architectural software course taught by non-profit BIM Studio, after a friend told him about it piqued his interest.

After the course, he was invited back to intern with the social enterprise. He was paid S\$800 a month to produce 2D and 3D architectural drawings. But after the one-year internship ended in 2018, BIM Studio was unable to match him to more permanent employment. Mr Chen was out of a job again.

He has been looking for a job again since then. To bolster his chances, Mr Chen took up one course after another – from digital marketing to building information modelling - under training providers brought in by SG Enable. The job offers that did come his way were either unrealistic - one firm offered to pay S\$500 a month for him to design websites six days a week - or they were suddenly rescinded. He would be told: “You don’t have the right skills.”

Mr Chen thinks it is his disability to blame, even though he had 28 years’ experience in construction before his stroke.

Autistic artist and researcher Dr Dawn-joy Leong claimed that when she applied to teach art and music at various private schools after she returned to Singapore in 2017, she was either “ghosted”, or told that she was “not suitable for (their) culture, or “overqualified”.

“It’s quite ridiculous because...if they advertise XYZ amount a month, and I apply for it, it’s obvious that I’m aware (of the pay),” Dr Leong, who is now a freelance artist and educator after a futile two-year job hunt, said.

Until he was diagnosed with cone-rod dystrophy, an incurable degenerative eye condition that causes vision loss, Raymond was an operations manager for a chain of travel retail stores, in charge of 17 shops and 250 employees.

He resigned soon after the diagnosis in 2011, “feeling bad” about his inability to do his job properly. It required him to drive, and send out e-mails and texts frequently.

“I can’t drive, I can’t use the PC,” Raymond, who declined to give his last name. “Anything more than one metre away looks like a blurry figure to me. I can’t make out its features.”

He found jobs that required less paperwork, travelling and computer use, but even those were too taxing for his eyes. In his last role before he stopped work temporarily, Raymond was a salesperson at a lifestyle store, but reading numbers on the cash register and looking at price tags was too much of a strain on his eyes.

His ophthalmologist advised him to stop working, so he stayed home for two years until he was told by the doctor he could rejoin the workforce - with caveats: “Nothing that would stress my eyes, no computer work, no sunlight”.

Raymond remembers getting the green light in May 2018. After that, it took him six months to find a job as a guest relations staffer at a tourist attraction, and that was through a friend’s recommendation.

He sent out “hundreds of applications”, to online job portals like LinkedIn, and only got “a handful of calls back”. He had openly disclosed his disability.

These calls, he claimed, focused only on “asking me what I can see and cannot see”. No one followed up after that.

When asked why he did not report these cases to the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP), the official body that looks into discrimination claims, Raymond looked surprised.

“I didn’t know about TAFEP until you told me. Nobody told me about them,” he said.

TAFEP said in a written response that in recent years, it received “on average about one complaint of discrimination against people with disabilities each year”, and encourages them to contact the agency if they encounter discrimination.

“To verify allegations, TAFEP’s officers engage employers to review supporting documents, such as job ads, application forms, job descriptions, interview records, relevant HR policies, and correspondence between the parties involved,” the spokesperson said.

Numbers not a tell-all

Just because the figure is near zero does not mean PWDs are not unfairly sidelined, said Dr Marissa Lee Medjeral-Mills, the executive director of the Disabled People’s Association.

The lack of anti-discrimination laws - which the Ministry of Manpower has said could deter employers from hiring the very people the law protects - and fear among disabled job hunters make it tough to prove any wrongdoing.

“Without anti-discrimination legislation, it is difficult to define discrimination and come to a general agreement on what it constitutes in the workplace,” said Dr Medjeral-Mills.

On the other end, disabled jobseekers may stop short of lodging complaints for several reasons. They may have doubts whether their case would be fairly resolved, or they could be unaware they are victims of discrimination.

Some might brush off the act as they are more desperate to secure a job than to stake their rights, she said, referring to a 2018 study DPA did with the Institute of Policy Studies on the forms of discrimination PWDs faced in the workplace.

Representatives from SG Enable and Workforce Singapore, which run the Open Door Programme aimed to help PWDs find employment, acknowledged the bias some employers have against those with disabilities.

“Some employers hesitate to hire PWDs as they may have negative perceptions about them, such as them being less productive,” the agencies said in a written response. “They may also think that supporting an employee with disabilities would be too costly or require too much effort.”

However, “with a reasonable amount of support and understanding, employees with disabilities are capable of working independently and be as productive,” they said, alluding to the schemes for both employer and PWDs under the programme.

Belittled at work

Even after getting hired, PWDs face a slew of employment issues - low pay, a limited choice of jobs and impatient colleagues.

Raymond, now a concierge staff at a technology firm, earns about 30 per cent of what he last drew at the travel retail chain.

He recalled getting frequently asked “why are you staring at me?” at his current workplace, until he was given a tag informing others of his sight condition. He stares because he takes a long time to figure out what the object in front of him is, he explained.

Coming to terms that life will never be the same is something Raymond still grapples with.

“Sometimes, I still can't accept, especially when I... think of how we were (like) previously and what we are now,” the father of two said. “We were comfortable then. We were staying in (a condominium). We had maids, we had dogs.”

"(Now), instead of going to restaurants to eat, we are eating at food court," he added. "(Because) of the coronavirus, we didn't go out the whole weekend, (but it was more of an) excuse not to go out so that we don't spend money."

As for Mr Chen, he is willing to accept a job that pays below S\$1,000 a month - about a third to a quarter of what he earned as a contractor - as long as it covers his transport and food expenses, he said.

Disability organisations noted that PWDs are usually presented with rank-and-file options.

The PWDs placed by the Open Door Programme tend to take up back-of-house positions in food services, hospitality, retail, as well as administrative and customer service roles, said WSG and SG Enable.

The agencies have helped over 2,100 PWDs get hired by almost 820 companies between January 2016 and September 2019 through the initiative.

Lee Hui Lin, the assistant director of employment and training at SPD (formerly known as the Society for the Physically Disabled), said that of the 180 clients the organisation helped to secure employment last financial year (April 2018 to March 2019), 126 were placed in rank and file roles.

"It's either freelance, or F&B, or something they can work from home," said Dr Medjeral-Mills. "I would say it is reinforcing that PWDs can only do certain things, because it's all about representation."

There are plenty of so-called sound business reasons that employers can use to justify prejudiced thinking, said Dr Justin Lee, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

Some of the excuses include "don't do customer facing roles, because customers don't know how to communicate or interact with you," or "our company faces a lot of competition and times are hard, so we cannot afford to pay you so much", he said.

Hardly any PWDs occupy leadership or upper management positions, because companies do not think they are able to handle the work, Dr Medjeral-Mills said.

Not giving up

According to 2019's manpower figures, the labour force participation rate of PWDs (aged 15 to 64) at 32.8 per cent, is less than half of the entire population's (aged 15 and over) 68 per cent.

But disability advocacy groups and PWDs themselves commend the strides the country has made in improving employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Government agencies like SG Enable and the Ministry of Manpower have been offering more grants, legal protection and training for both employers and PWDs, said Dr Medjeral-Mills,

citing last year's amendments to the Employment Act as one example of ensuring better safeguards for employees, including PWDs.

As more workers become aware of their rights today, an increasing number of companies are also "taking a harder look at their current employment practices and trying to remove barriers that they may face in the workplace," she added, such as embracing diversity in their hiring practices and updating their internal staff policies.

The F&B and hospitality sectors are experiencing high manpower shortage, which is why they are more open to training and hiring PWDs, said Autism Resource Centre president Denise Phua.

But they should not be limited to these fields, noting places such as UOB and NTUC Fairprice have hired PWDs on a "sustainable basis", Ms Phua, who co-chairs a workgroup on raising PWDs' employability that will report its recommendations this year, added.

Raymond, for one, is thankful for the assistance SPD has lent him. After explaining to one of its job coaches why he needed to leave his previous workplace at a tourist attraction - he could not stand in direct sunlight for long hours - she got him an interview with his current employer "in (just) a few days".

Rather than abandon all hope, attending one workshop after another has kept Mr Chen steadily optimistic about finding a job.

He remembers the despair when he first came home after his stroke. Every day for a year, he practised climbing onto a stool with suicide in mind.

But the day he successfully stood on it, he thought to himself: "What is the point of jumping if I can train myself to move?"

Nine year later, he possesses the same spirit of perseverance, believing that it is a matter of the mind.

"Our mind controls us," he said. "Once we tell ourselves that we can't do it, then we won't be able to do it."

"So I tell others: if I can continue, why can't you?"