

Call to integrate people with disabilities early

Their employment rate could rise if they grow up among other kids

Kok Xing Hui

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When it comes to the employment prospects of people with disabilities, let's start young. Singaporeans, with and without disabilities, should be studying and playing together as children.

That is the view of industry stakeholders, who said early integration of those with disabilities is a possible way to raise their employment rate.

Disabled People's Association executive director Marissa Lee Medjeral-Mills told *The Sunday Times*: "Not having grown up together in school, many are encountering persons with disabilities for the first time in the workplace."

As adults who do not know what it is like to have a disability, "they are less likely to hire a person with a disability and, if they do, they are less aware of how to communicate and work with that person", she said.

Ms Anita Fam, vice-president of the National Council of Social Service, said: "They are real people that we have to have in our midst."

And disabled people should be visible in everyday life, in mainstream pre-schools and schools, she added.

This week, the Government will detail how it will spend \$400 million this year on persons with disabilities. The sum will cover existing programmes and new ones, such as the expansion of job training initiatives for graduates of special schools.

But the change of mindset is just as crucial, noted the industry stakeholders. Said Ms Fam: "The more people are exposed to and meet people with disabilities, then they realise: Oh, they have these abilities!"

Currently, 0.55 per cent of the resident workforce has a disability. It is hard to say if this figure is high or low compared with other countries, as other countries typically measure the rate of employment within the community, said Dr Medjeral-Mills.

In the United States, for example, 17.5 per cent of the disabled population was employed in 2015. The figure stands at 47.3 per cent in the European Union in 2011.

Ms Indranee Rajah, Senior Minister of State for Finance and Law, said during a pre-Budget visit to the Enabling Village last month: "I suspect there is a large number who may not be (employed in Singapore) but could potentially be."

The Enabling Village is a community space run by SG Enable, where those with disabilities can shop, access services and attend training.

SG Enable has been training beneficiaries and matching them with jobs. More than 65 students from special education schools have successfully transitioned into employment or internship, said its chief executive Ku Geok Boon.

To boost employment figures, Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Justin Lee said the authorities could consider setting a quota, or giving tax incentives. "We can try it in a small way, maybe for public agencies or large corporations."

As of last year, there were 270 disabled people employed by the Government. The public sector has about 145,000 employees in all.

Last Thursday, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said he had asked the civil service to "look seriously" into how it can hire those with disabilities.

Mr Abhimanyau Pal, executive director of SPD (formerly known as the Society for the Physically Disabled), said many buildings are still not wheelchair accessible, making it hard for wheelchair users to work or attend training courses.

Autism Resource Centre (Singapore) deputy executive director Jacelyn Lim said employers "need to be shown models, systems, possibilities and success that employment and work can be done for people with autism".

"People with special needs also want to lead financially independent and dignified lives like you and me. They need the community's help to provide them with opportunities to make meaningful contributions to the workplace and society."