

Two Sides of the Same Coin but Two Very Different Approaches

It was interesting that, in the same week, I came across two articles addressing the issue of the low numbers of people with disabilities gaining paid work.



The first was an article about the comments made by Philip Davies, MP for Shipley where he suggests that people with disabilities should be allowed (if they choose to do so) to work for less than the national minimum wage for a period to prove their value as an employee. He argues that if an employer were presented with two candidates, one with disabilities and the other without, the employer is most likely to choose the non disabled employee.

I disagree with his views on a whole number of levels but my biggest concern is for people with learning difficulties and individuals on the autistic spectrum. We know that many people benefit from having additional support during recruitment and/or the initial phase where they are learning a job. This support has often been provided by job coaches or other supported employment personnel.

In these frighteningly austere times, we are hearing of supported employment services budgets being cut or even services closures, greatly reducing the labour pool who can offer people this practical and often crucial support. In the absence of this kind of assistance, how long will it take a person with a learning



difficulty to learn to do a job to the employer's standard? Indeed, for some this period of employment for less than the minimum wage could actually have the opposite effect and might enable employers to screen the person out of the job. It is essential that those in authority look to meaningful investment in good quality supported employment services as for many; this is the key to success. Interestingly one of the most significant periods of investment in supported employment services was during the Thatcher era so it is not out with the capacity of the Conservative party to invest if they want to encourage people to take up employment.

The second article was written by New York based disabled businessman and former Wall Street trader, Rich Donovan. He argues that quotas and laws simply don't work as any business that knows its stuff can usually find hot shot lawyers to find loop holes in the



legislation. His mantra is that disabled people are customers first with a formidable spending power. There are 1.1 billion people with disabilities

globally with spending power of around \$4 trillion (a market which is approximately the size of China).

He argues that many multi-national companies think of disability in the sense of charity (a box to tick), ignoring the combined spending power and business value of this group of their market.

On reviewing both articles, I know whose opinion impressed most and whose approach makes sense in terms of how we value people and their potential contribution. It is equally important to stress that Rich's approach makes sound business sense and we know that this is where arguments and debates with big business can be won.

There are estimated to be around 120,000 people with learning difficulties and 50,000 individuals on the autistic spectrum living in Scotland. If you then consider that they have family, friends and other supporters, you can immediately start to see the ripple effect of a proactive approach to their recruitment. Doing so not only says something about the company and their positive approach to diversity, it also helps the employer to better understand the needs of their customers. If you have a diverse group of staff and can successfully accommodate their needs as employees, you will, as a



consequence have a much better understanding of the range of needs of **all** of your customers and will be better equipped to meet those needs.

I urge you to consider both perspectives and decide which makes sense to you. If you agree with Rich's perspective there are things you can do to promote this agenda. We can all play a role in encouraging businesses large and small to consider recruiting people with disabilities. Some of the statistics Rich quotes will certainly provide you with some useful points to raise with businesses to help them to think about the bigger picture. We can also all play a role in lobbying at a UK, Scottish and local level to ensure that good existing supported employment services are protected and that there is investment in more services to provide the practical support that many people will need to take their rightful place in the workplace.

To view either article, please use the links below:-

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2011/jun/17/tory-philip-davies-disabled-people-work> (Philip Davies article)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ouch/opinion/disability-employment.shtml> (Rich Donovan article)

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