

SUPPLY AUGMENTATION IN THE EMPLOYMENT MARKET FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the ways to move away from low levels of employment and low remuneration, to high levels of employment and reasonable remuneration, for persons with disabilities. It illustrates steps to increase the supply of persons with disabilities and make their presence more conspicuous in the labour market. The author points out that a different set of instruments is needed to augment supply of persons with disabilities in the labour market as compared to augmenting the demand. In an earlier article the author had described methods to improve demand through short-term measures like a government fiat on concessions and facilities and so on, through an administrative order (1). Enhancing supply needs long-term investment in the development of persons with disabilities for their education, vocational training, skill development and other requirements of the work place.

INTRODUCTION

Economic independence through wage or self-employment of persons with disabilities is arguably the single most important component in empowering them. All other aspects like provision of assistive devices, barrier free environment, education, training and so on are almost always aimed at providing employment opportunities to them. It is an established fact that there is a burgeoning gap between demand and supply of labour in India. With the move towards liberalisation and laissez fair economic system, especially since 1991, the protected labour market is giving way to market led demands for labour. The employment in the government sector is actually declining (2) making it extremely difficult for persons to enter the government sector. The difficulties are further compounded in the case of persons with disabilities who require additional support and assistance. There are about 7 million disabled persons awaiting employment (3). As per the Working Group on Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, the projected estimate of persons with disabilities in the employable age for 2001 is 163.71 lakhs (4). The changing economic scenario therefore, makes it imperative to provide a level playing field to persons with disabilities by providing the necessary supports.

The supply of persons with disabilities in the short run is inelastic and therefore any plans to increase employment potential have to be for long-term (5). Equal opportunities, one of the three goals of the Persons with Disabilities Act (PDA) 1995, can only be realised through long-term investment in education, vocational training, skill development and other needs of the work place. Each of them requires careful planning, co-ordination, funding and execution with additional support services, in an inclusive environment.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Vocational training and skill development form the crucial link between education and actual placement. Like any component of augmenting supply of employable persons with disabilities, imparting vocational training and skill development is an ongoing phenomenon, necessitating a perspective plan. While vocational training has to be specific to the capacity and capability of the concerned persons, it also entails the provision of many supportive services. The government has a key role to play in this, especially in preparing persons with disabilities to join the private sector or to take up self-employment. Vocational instructors and trainers require to be sensitised to the capabilities and the needs of persons with disabilities. Many more training centres are required in remote and rural areas. The government will have to facilitate the changes in physical environment to make it disabled friendly and barrier free, and promote modification of tools and equipment. There is a need to promote research for implementing these changes. The private sector activities in this area need to be subsidised or fully paid by the government.

The government has already initiated several measures and accelerated many others for skill development and vocational training of persons with disabilities. There are 17 Vocational Rehabilitation Centres located in 16 States, providing vocational training and professional enhancement (6). There are also some special employment exchanges and special cells in general employment exchanges. The government implements a Scheme for Promotion of Voluntary Action for persons with disabilities, under which vocational training is carried out. The expenditure under this Scheme has gone up substantially in the last few years. The Scheme

is implemented through Non-Governmental Organisations and financial assistance is provided under the heads like 'Equipment', 'Vocational Counsellors', 'Vocational Instructors' and so on. During 1999-2000, the government assisted 56 organisations providing vocational training facilities. In addition, there are approximately 125 other organisations that are involved in vocational training. Approximately 181 organisations impart training to about 7500 persons with disabilities today. The government has also initiated the process of reserving, in selected polytechnics, a high percentage of seats for persons with disabilities. At present the scheme is being implemented through the Department of Education in 50 selected polytechnics, where additional support services like barrier free features, modified tools and equipment and re-orientation/training of instructors are being implemented.

However, a study by the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People pointed out that in terms of employment the voluntary sector had very little to offer (3). While there were many benefits from implementing the Scheme for Vocational Training, its biggest drawback was the failure to link vocational training to employment. The implementation of the scheme was highly skewed in favour of a few States. For example, of the Rs.62 Crores distributed under the scheme, as much as 35% was allocated to organisations from 2 States and 55% of the total was spent in just 4 States. Further, although these schemes were making important contributions to skill in persons with disabilities, the effects were negligible in comparison to the demand for it. The scheme's coverage was limited.

In order to promote employment opportunities, some specific measures need urgent emphasis. The work environment should be altered so that persons with disabilities can freely and easily use them. Efforts should be made to train them in vocations that can lead to their employment in large numbers. Vocational instructors should be sensitised to their needs, capabilities and limitations. Over and above, changes have to occur in the attitude of employers and their beliefs about the capability of persons with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

In order to enhance the employability of persons with disabilities, certain urgent measures have to be undertaken. They are as follows:

- Training courses for vocational instructors should include a module on disability issues to increase their sensitivity to persons with disabilities, besides the vocation they are being trained in.
- Release of grants to Non-Governmental Organisations for vocational training under the 'Scheme of Promotion of Voluntary Action' should be conditional to building barrier free environment, their vocational instructors being trained in disability issues and availability of necessary equipment and learning materials for training with them.
- There are over 4100 Industrial Training Institutes in government and private sectors, with a capacity of over 6 lakh trainees. They should be encouraged to reserve at least 3% of seats for persons with disabilities.
- As most of the vocational training institutions are in the government sector, supported by the government, besides a 3% reservation, its utilisation by persons with disabilities should be ensured by providing facilities suitable for them.
- The number of vocational training institutions at present is only 17. The numbers should be enhanced to at least one in every state. Existing vocational rehabilitation centres should be modernised to keep pace with emerging market opportunities.
- Efforts should be made to establish self help groups so that the relatively more capable persons with disabilities can become leaders and trainers.
- A national programme of vocational training and employment of persons with disabilities in rural areas should be undertaken. Under the programme, continuous identification of new self and wage employment opportunities for persons with disabilities should be carried out, along with skill development, employment linked vocational training, and marketing support.

- As information technology is emerging as a very large avenue for employment, persons with disabilities should be trained in these facilities through appropriate modification in hardware and software.
- Applied research, technology up-gradation, improvement in tools, assistive devices and work environment, should be continuously carried out and funded.
- Awareness generation and dissemination of information should be carried out actively.

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