

To Hon KWOK Wai-keung, JP and Other Members of Panel on Public Service:

I am speaking about the employment of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the civil service as an individual with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

One may not have any reactions, except shaking his or her head when studying the figures of the number of civil servants with disabilities. For example, between April 2018 and March 2019, among the new 11 698 civil servants, only 90 (0.7%) were known to have disabilities, none of whom were known to have ASD. This figure is dismal.

Being a current member of the government, I have had first-hand experience in dealing with the stigma of disclosing my disability status, especially ADD and ASD being considered “Hidden Disabilities”. (1) When should I disclose it? (2) Whom should I inform first? (3) What are the disclosure procedures? (4) What would be the possible consequences after disclosure? These questions had occupied my mind for almost a year.

I understand that the meeting today is discussing issues related to the recruitment of PWDs to join the government. Currently, the government’s recruitment advertisement merely states that PWDs could bypass any shortlisting processes to attend the written test or the interview if they meet the criteria. However, in the past, some PWDs had complained that they might not be hired if they had chosen to disclose their disability status. To encourage PWDs to seriously consider careers in the government, I strongly believe that the assessment criteria for the selection of employees should be made transparent. Such transparency would be able to help PWDs to understand how skills, attributes, relevant work experiences would be prioritised in the selection assessments, thus enhancing the fairness in the recruitment process and strengthening the possibility of hiring the most suitable talents for the government. Likewise, the PWDs should also be asked if there are any particular things that the interview panel can do that will make the interview more effective for the PWDs and the panel members.

Turning to one of the most controversial issues surrounding the recruitment of PWDs to the government: employment quotas. Opponents of employment quotas believe that there may be reverse discrimination, meaning that the able-bodied may be discriminated against in employment. The opponents also argue that the

government should hire people based on merit and skills. However, individuals could be born with disabilities or acquire them due to accidents or illnesses. Long-term health conditions and mental health issues can impact anybody at any time. An able-bodied person today against employment quotas may end up with disabilities tomorrow due to unforeseeable circumstances. The government as an employer can create a level playing field through sufficient employment opportunities for PWDs. A diverse workforce can result in higher retention rates through greater levels of loyalty and commitment and a widening of the talent and life experience pool and an improved employer brand. Except for certain government jobs such as firemen/firewomen and policemen/policewomen, quota obligation or at least a target for the percentage of PWDs to be hired in specific government departments should be implemented.

Recruitment matters. Staff training and procedures for PWDs to disclose their status and equally matter. I would like to make the following recommendations about ways to recruit PWDs and support them if they join the government:

First, specify the core skills and attributes needed for each job and match them with different types of disabilities. For example, Autistic individuals that are good at mathematics can work as accountants in specialized fields such as financial accounting. These individuals may consider careers with the Treasury. To facilitate PWDs for considering different jobs of government jobs, committees and sub-committees formed by government representatives, experts from social work, medical and education professions can be set up to review each occupation in the government in terms of the basic skills and attributes needed to perform the core duties on the job periodically. The information can then be published for the general public, especially PWDs as they make further study and career plans.

Second, government departments can target their recruitment campaigns at different disability groups. For example, the National Archives of the United Kingdom works with the National Autistic Society to provide Autism students with work experience in document services. Students with Autism can obtain a range of useful skills for future work like filing documents accurately, dealing with visitors, and working effectively as a team member. While work experience programmes like the one above are important for Autistic people or PWDs to learn more about different job natures such as being an archivist and a receptionist, outreach to different disability groups is equally crucial. Currently in Hong Kong, as far as I am aware when it comes to government departments targeting specific groups for recruitments, only

disciplinary forces have special recruitment programmes for ethnic minority members.

To further broaden the appeal of careers in the government for PWDs, different government departments can organise careers exhibitions, workshops, workplace visits, and talks providing PWDs with information regarding the skills and attributes, qualifications, daily duties and career prospects of various government positions. Government departments can also collaborate with community and advocacy groups to explore ways for PWDs in the government to work with dignity.

Third, it is related to the most fundamental part of providing PWDs with meaningful employment opportunities, namely recruitment. I would like to focus on people with ASD. Traditionally, most government departments employ standardised recruitment criteria that aim at hiring people with excellent communication skills, great team players, high levels of emotional intelligence, and the ability to conform to established practices without special assistance. These criteria are likely to screen non-typical candidates such as those with ASD out.

To address the issues that arise in the recruitment process, government departments study recruitment models for PWDs. For instance, I would like to refer to Specialisterne, a Danish company known for hiring ASD employees with branches in Australia, Canada, Ireland, and Singapore. Specialisterne first invites a group of candidates to spend half a day in comfortable settings with managers, where they have casual interactions. Afterwards, the shortlisted candidates undergo an assessment between two and six weeks, where they work on assigned projects, undertake case studies involving real-life situations, and take part in training relevant to their future roles.

Some critics may say that the cost of making special arrangements for PWDs might be too high. However, the cost of such recruitment can be reduced. Government departments can work with different PWD advocacy groups and specialists to devise interview processes that would be cost-effective, yet fair at the same time.

Fourth, the government needs to rethink its training programmes to employees. A little extra effort can go a long way. It should be mandatory for employees with or without disabilities to undergo training covering disability issues. Referring to training programmes for officers in my workplace, I have noted that seminars related to Disability Ordinance for staff are from time to time held. However, there are hardly any seminars focusing on other aspects of disability issues such as

communication.

The primary goal of this training is to increase empathy and help public servants better understand the plights of people with disabilities and reduce stigma. Employees should also learn more about the tools and accommodations available to persons with disabilities to empower them at work.

When it comes to reducing stigma, I would like to suggest simplifying procedures for PWDs to disclose their status if they have been diagnosed upon the government. The PWDs should be allowed to bypass their immediate supervisors and sectional heads to inform the personnel section (the section) of their respective bureau. Such procedures, I believe, can help PWDs to feel safe to disclose their status since they can send inform the section of their status on a confidential basis.

Fifth, with the lack of support groups/staff associations formed by PWDs working for the government, at this stage, a regular communication channel needs to be established for PWDs currently working for the government to communicate their issues with senior members of their department so that better accommodative measures can be implemented at work.

To conclude, as much as it is important to explore measures providing PWDs with more opportunities to join the government, it is equally crucial for PWDs to be able to work in a dignified environment through a transparent recruitment process, a safe environment for PWDs to disclose their status, reforming training programmes to current employees and those with supervisory responsibilities and an open communication channel for employees with PWDs.

Jonathan MOK

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