

Companies warming up to differently abled, but alienation remains

Several NGOs provide training, placements and opportunities to the differently or specially abled

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Staff catering to customers at a Lemon Tree outlet. About 10% of Lemon Tree's total workforce is accounted for by specially abled people

Anuj Bisht, who works at a KFC outlet in [Vasant Square Mall](#) in Vasant Kunj here, smiles in an impish way, before pointing to the menu and asking guests what they would like to order.

Bisht, 29, speech and hearing impaired (SHI) since birth, has been working here for two years. In fact, 15 of the 35 employees running this outlet, including seven delivery boys, are differently abled.

According to [Census 2011](#) data, persons with disabilities, numbering 26.8 million, account for 2.21 per cent of India's population. About 12.5 million, or 45 per cent of them, are speech, hearing or orthopaedically impaired.

"The challenges these people face in their daily lives are enormous. Finding employment is a major hurdle," says Meera Bhatia, chief executive of Sai Swayam Society, a non-profit organisation. A former software engineer, she has been training [SHI](#) individuals for about a decade. Last month, she received the National Award for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, as best placement officer in the NGO sub-category.

Sumit, another SHI employee Business Standard spoke to, said though the salaries paid to such people were low, their biggest problem was grappling with a sense of alienation. "Even today, my own parents don't know sign language. They would berate me for not earning, while my sister did. Where could I find work?" asks Sumit, 24. His sister, who worked as an air hostess, would help him with finances.

Bhatia, whose parents were speech and hearing disabled as well, says "the psychological inferiority at not being able to hang around and converse with 'normal' kids their age" is the biggest challenge. "Pushed into a normal work environment, many withdraw because they fear persecution."

Several NGOs try to fill in the gap by providing training, placements and opportunities to the differently or specially abled. Enable India, a Bengaluru-based NGO, for instance, has worked with Lemon Tree Hotels, Accenture, SAP Labs and Tata Trust, among others, as a placement agency for the disabled.

"Approaching businesses and corporate structures with a mutually beneficial proposal is essential. If you ask for altruism, it can only take you so far," says Pranesh Nagri, honorary director at Enable India. Roles can be tailor-made around disabilities, says Nagri.

State Bank of India is an example of industry looking at the other side of business. It created 'happy rooms' at some of its offices, where differently abled people manned desks to deal with 'unhappy' customers and ensure prompt redress. There are others, too. Shell has small boards with petrol/diesel and cash/card inscriptions for its SHI employees. Costa Coffee recruits individuals with disabilities as baristas and to work at cash counters.

"Employing specially abled people has to be remunerative for a pro-profit business. Otherwise, our efforts will never be sustainable. It is more than simply training; the follow-through involves sensitisation of both the new employee and the employer's environment," says Nagri.

NGOs and experts say corporations are slowly warming up to offering employment opportunities to specially abled people. "Just five years ago, the response was lukewarm at best," says Bhatia. "It was simply part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR). But slowly, they are evolving to become more inclusive and tapping unexplored potential."

At Lemon Tree Hotels, about 10 per cent of the total workforce is accounted for by specially abled people. The hotel is exploring a trial run with individuals with Down Syndrome, too. "The plan is to increase our initiatives to a national scale after gaining more experience on the ground," says Aradhana Lal, vice-president (sustainability initiatives), Lemon Tree Hotels.

Yum! Restaurants (which includes KFC, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell) has a total of 693 stores. Of these, 19 focus on specially abled people. Of their more than 35,000 employees, about 10 per cent, or 350-odd, are differently abled - all belonging to the KFC franchise.

"Recently, we opened Yum! Academy to train SHI individuals at six locations in India, as part of our CSR efforts," says Sanchita Singh, chief people officer, Yum! Restaurants India.

In a scenario where industry is just about getting sensitised to the idea of employing specially abled people, NGOs argue such individuals' high retention rate at companies, more than 90 per cent, should be seen as a big plus.