

Helping persons with disabilities find work in Singapore: A personal testimony

It is a struggle for talented persons with disabilities to find a good job in Singapore. Enlightened employers are still a small minority.



Tommy Koh

From 1984 to 1990, I was based in Washington, as Singapore's ambassador to the United States. Soon after my arrival, someone from Gallaudet University contacted me. I must confess that I had never heard of the university.

Gallaudet University is a private, federally chartered university, founded in 1864 for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. I was told that there were a few students from Singapore at the university and asked if I would like to meet them. My wife and I invited them home for dinner. We kept in touch with all the students while we were in Washington.

Gallaudet University has produced some famous alumni. These include Nyle DiMarco, an American actor, model and activist, the South African politician Wilma Newhould-Druchen and British poet Dorothy Miles.

In 1990, as I prepared to return to Singapore, I encouraged the graduating students at Gallaudet University to do likewise and promised I would help them find employment.

They returned to Singapore to look for work. Yet, only one member of the cohort managed to find a job, to teach at the Singapore School for the Deaf.

The rest could not secure employment despite their degrees in accounting, computer science

and business. I knocked on many doors but was not successful. In frustration, all of them went back to the US to find work in their chosen vocations. They eventually found success in the US. They were able to find jobs in the professions and vocations they had earned degrees in.

Gallaudet students have this spirit of determination. Some years back, my wife and I were having a meal at the American Club. A waiting staff approached me and asked whether she could speak to me. She explained that she was deaf but could lip-read.

She said she was a student at Gallaudet but dropped out before her final year because she ran out of money. She asked me to help her secure a scholarship so that she could go back and finish her final year. I managed to persuade the Lee Foundation to give her a scholarship. She graduated from Gallaudet, found work in the US and married an American man.

A BILL OF RIGHTS

In 2012, Singapore became a party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is essentially the global equivalent of the Bill of Rights for persons with disabilities throughout the world. The two fundamental principles of the convention are equal rights and non-discrimination.

Article 27 of the convention deals with work and employment. The article recognises the right of persons with disabilities to work, on an equal basis with others. Discrimination on the basis of disability is prohibited. Article 27 (1)(g) of the convention requires governments to "employ persons with disabilities in the public sector".

Article 27(1)(h) of the convention also obligates governments to promote the employment of persons with disabilities in the private sector by affirmative action programmes, incentives and other measures.

The Singapore Government has worked conscientiously to fulfil



its obligations under the convention. On employment, the Ministry of Social and Family Development and the Ministry of Manpower have championed inclusive employment.

The Government has adopted a series of Enabling Masterplans. The Enabling Masterplan 2030, noting that the average employment rate of resident persons with disabilities in 2020 to 2021 was 30.1 per cent, articulated a goal for this figure to reach 40 per cent in 2030.

Yet in Switzerland the average employment rate of persons with disabilities is 69 per cent. This is how far Singapore is from a model country on this count.

The Singapore Government has introduced many incentive schemes to encourage the private sector to employ persons with disabilities. These include the Enabling Employment Credit, which was implemented in 2021. Under this scheme, employers who employ persons with disabilities are given a wage offset. For the first year it was implemented, the scheme supported 6,400 employers who employed more than 9,700

Singaporeans with disabilities.

In 2020, the Government introduced the Enabling Mark. It is a way to recognise organisations for their best practices and outcomes in disability-inclusive employment.

NOT AS BAD BUT NOT AS GOOD

The situation in Singapore today is certainly not as bad as the situation in 1990, but it is still not good. A couple of years ago, two of my good friends asked for my help. As they are growing old, they would like their son, who is an architect working in Britain, to return to Singapore. Their talented son was born with a defective leg and uses a wheelchair to get around.

With his impressive curriculum vitae, I was confident that I could find him a job. So I wrote to friends in three statutory boards which employ architects, to ask if they would like to interview the young man. All three, however, replied in the negative. I was tempted to remind them of the obligation of the Government, under Article 27(1)(g) of the convention, to employ persons

with disabilities in the public sector.

Not wanting to give up, I wrote to friends in five leading architectural firms to ask if they would be interested in interviewing my friends' son. Only one responded in the positive. They interviewed him, were impressed by him and hired him. They asked only for some time to retrofit their office in order to accommodate his wheelchair.

Based on this recent experience, I must say we have made much progress as a country, at least compared with 1990. The trajectory is moving in the right direction. However, it is still a struggle for talented persons with disabilities to find a good job in Singapore. There are enlightened employers who would employ such persons, but they are still a small minority.

• Professor Tommy Koh is patron of the Rainbow Centre, the Singapore Association of the Visually Handicapped, Guide Dogs Singapore and Art.Dis, a charity that aims to empower persons with disabilities through the arts.

Differently abled staff and volunteers packing mooncake boxes at the Enabling Village in 2019. The Enabling Masterplan 2030, noting that the average employment rate of resident persons with disabilities in 2020 to 2021 was 30.1 per cent, articulated a goal for this figure to reach 40 per cent in 2030. In Switzerland the average employment rate of persons with disabilities is 69 per cent. ST FILE PHOTO