
Including People with Disabilities in the Workforce

The vision

Launched by the Taoiseach in Farmleigh House on 2nd October 2015, the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities laid out a 10-year government plan to ensure that people with disabilities who want to work in the open labour market are supported and enabled to do so.

The strategy aims for the employment rate of people with disabilities to increase by 15% from its 2011 level, with an overall increase in the general employment rate from 33% to 38% by 2024. It is expected that the number of people with disabilities in the public sector will increase from 3% to 6% within this timeframe, and I am one of those people.

Developing as a professional in the workplace

In 2014, I applied for Willing Able Mentoring (WAM), a graduate work placement programme run by the Association for Higher Education Access & Disability (AHEAD) where employers are also assisted to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace. A few months ago, an internship for the Civil Service was advertised and so I updated my CV and filled in the application. I was delighted to be called for interview: the WAM team informed me that the panel were a professional body while sensitive to my disability.

I made my preparations which included a list of core competency skills drawn from my work, education, volunteering, and hobbies. Although I hadn't worked for several years, I still managed to nurture these competencies through 4 years at the National Learning Network in Phibsboro, Dublin, a college for people with disabilities. I was 90% ready when I met with the interviewers and I did my best to connect and to sell myself. Afterwards, I reflected that it was a solid performance but I quickly refocused as there were a number of weeks wait until the next stage.

My university class reunion in the United States gave me a well needed break in the meantime and the can-do American attitude boosted my confidence. I returned home to hear that I had been successful at the job interview and that a suitable placement was being sought. I began to dream of work again: for greater meaning and for family life.

Even though my early career was quite fruitful in counselling and social care, I encountered several months of extreme stress while living in England. This tipped me over the edge into mania and depression, and I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at 30. I slowly picked up the pieces, until finally feeling that can-do American attitude again.

I was offered a 6 month paid internship in the Department of Social Protection after an informal discussion with a civil servant; specifically I was asked to assist the implementation of the employment strategy. What I find wonderful is that I make use of my talents in psychology and writing as well as my experience with mental illness.

Navigating reasonable accommodations and my own condition/impairment

The AHEAD Journal (January 2015) found that employers can have confidence in workers with disabilities: once supports are put in place, disability essentially should disappear. And I have found this to be very much the case. For example, my manager knows that I require time off to attend medical appointments and that I may need to make telephone calls to my support network during working hours. These reasonable accommodations have increased my productivity and I consider myself on par with my colleagues. Moreover, I felt great consolation when my doctor described my mental health as 'stable' because I was deeply aware of great efforts to achieve this state. Doors continue to open up, as I recently moved to a more peaceful dwelling, a place I can call home. I feel pride in doing chores; I feel independence in managing my time; and I feel a sense of purpose going to work in the mornings. I still experience low moods and times of high stress, but, as I'm reminded again and again, so does everyone.

Vision and reality

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy focuses on people with disabilities throughout their lifespan, providing pathways for entry and re-entry into work. If I need to leave my job, the strategy ensures that I will have a streamlined return to disability payments. Research also reveals that prevention is the most effective way to address joblessness, so young people leaving the education system and those acquiring a disability in adult life are top priorities.

I believe that the inclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce will assist to 'normalise' disability. Already, I hear that mental health conditions are to be viewed along a scale of functioning rather than as a black or white diagnosis. We know that depressive and anxiety symptoms are incredibly common in our society and that many people have unusual experiences that mimic psychotic symptoms.

The hugely popular mindfulness movement is part of the solution, "Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (Jon Kabat-Zinn). Most of us can pay attention to our thoughts; emotions; feelings; and sensations in order to maintain balance. And, if we ever find ourselves leaning towards a degree of instability, we can always strive to return to a centre point.



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Gavin Murphy is a Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) intern at the Department of Social Protection where he helps people with disabilities return to work. The Dubliner received a scholarship from the University of Scranton, Pennsylvania, USA where he majored in psychology. Gavin developed a keen interest in writing as he recovered from mental illness and he currently runs a website entitled ilovebipolar.com. He is fascinated by the mindfulness-based practice of contemplative psychology which is gaining momentum abroad. Gavin enjoys running and the outdoors.

