
Enabling People for Employment

My career with Citi began in 1988 when I moved to the UK with my wife to be closer to her family. We lived in the Kent countryside and I commuted into London. It was a good time, surrounded by family and friends and I was fortunate to be able to work on a number of projects building new capabilities for Citi customers. The job involved extensive travel because we were global teams working on global projects. In my years with Citi, I have met and made friends with people all over the world – easily one of the most rewarding aspects of the job.

My first encounter with disability involved my wife's family. Congenital deafness runs in my brother-in-law's side of their family and two of my nieces were partially deaf. The eldest daughter was quite severely deaf. The first time that I met her was when she was about 6 years old. Mary was a bright, enthusiastic and fun-loving child. Even at that age, she was full of confidence and barely aware of her disability. At the time, Kent County Council had arranged for her to be in a special school for deaf children but that was not satisfactory to her father. He strongly believed that this school was not challenging her enough and was allowing her to use her deafness as an excuse for not working hard enough. Bill was also deaf and refused to allow this to hold him back. After many meetings with school officials, they succeeded in getting Mary placed in a mainstream school.

Facilities for disabled people are much more advanced in the UK than they are in Ireland. Part of getting Mary into a mainstream school involved having her 'Statemented' by the council. This involved visits to audiologists and tests. It was worth it because once the Statement was issued, an amazing amount of support was provided. Induction loops were installed in the house and connected to the TV and stereo and a doorbell light was installed. In addition, Mary was provided with an amplification system for school. The teachers were given a microphone and Mary had a receiver that connected to her hearing aids. The whole system was portable so that it could move from class to class.

As Mary grew older, the subject of work experience came up. The UK policy was that all second year students had a two week opportunity to visit a workplace and see what the world of work was really like. I was lucky in that Citi London strongly supported this and I was able to secure a placement for Mary. What I didn't realise was that I was going to learn as much about disability as Mary was going to learn about work! She came in with her usual confidence and, within the first morning had introduced herself to all of the team. In the process, she learned that one of the managers was also partially deaf – something that the rest of us hadn't realised! Mary attended all of our project meetings. She came into the meeting room, proudly placed her portable microphone in the middle of the table, and was able to hear what was going on. It was my first exposure to the power of Assistive Technology.

After 19 years in London, I was given the opportunity to transfer to a new role in Citi Dublin. I arrived with excitement and quickly felt at home. One of the things that differentiate Citi Dublin is its extensive Employee Engagement and Diversity Network. Word came round that a few people were starting a new network named 'Citi Disability' and I became involved in the initial meetings. My reason was simple – my experiences with Mary had sparked an interest in disability, especially in the workplace. It was as part of the Citi Disability network that I first became exposed to AHEAD and the WAM programme. We were approached to provide Internships for disabled graduates and were pleased to be able to place two people. As I became more involved with WAM, I was particularly impressed with its practical and pragmatic approach. In my opinion, one of the barriers that people with

disabilities face in finding employment is a fear among employers that they are going to say the wrong thing, or be forced to provide unreasonable accommodation. There is a fear that people with disabilities will be difficult to manage or to discipline if their performance isn't up to scratch. WAM provides a huge amount of support – essential to a manager having their first encounter with a disabled person. They also have an excellent employer-friendly attitude – helping to dispel the myths and understand that a disabled employee is, and should be treated as, the same as any other employee. They just need a little extra simple and practical help.

One aspect of my work with AHEAD that never fails to impress is the quality of the candidates that are provided to us as potential interns. I have managed people for over 30 years and seen thousands of CVs come across my desk. It is fair to say that the CVs I receive from WAM are easily amongst the most impressive with superb qualifications and a wide range of experiences. Something that is easy to forget is that candidates with a disability gaining degrees have shown extra focus and dedication and will bring those qualities to the workplace.

That is also a source of immense frustration to me. The work that AHEAD does should be replicated across the length and breadth of the land but it is not. When I think of the supports that were provided to Mary, I wonder why those supports do not exist in Ireland. When I talk to employment agencies and ask specifically for disabled candidates, I am met with blank stares. When I talk to the candidates themselves, they seem reluctant to put themselves forward because they don't believe that they will be given consideration.

Something needs to be done to break this cycle – there needs to be a national debate. I believe that the government has a role to play here. Enabling people for employment is good for everybody. It increases self-esteem and reduces the social welfare bill. Ireland is coming out of the recession now and good jobs are being created. There is even talk of skills shortages, especially in IT. Many of the disabled graduates that I have met could easily fill those roles – we just need to get people talking and acting.

My journey in Ireland is coming to an end. I have chosen to take early retirement from Citi and will be returning to the UK to re-join our family. I am unsure of my future plans, but certainly hope to continue the work in the field of disability that started here. I will deeply miss my colleagues in Citi Dublin and AHEAD, but I am sure that modern technology will allow us to keep in touch!

For more information on the WAM programme, see the AHEAD website www.ahead.ie or contact wam@ahead.ie



James Quinn

Former Senior Vice President, Citi Dublin

James Quinn is the former Senior Vice President, Citi Group Dublin. He was instrumental in working with AHEAD to establish a strong business case for the inclusion of disability in the mainstream workplace. James brought an insight from the employers' perspective while eagerly taking on the challenges of organisational culture and its norms.

