

Wheels of fortune



Finding a job is a lottery for many disabled people, but at least some employers in the city are willing to give them a chance, writes Elaine Yau

Able

- Records show there were 126,400 physically disabled people in Hong Kong in 2008
 - 32 per cent of them, or 41,000, are employed
- Source: Census and Statistics Department



Restaurant owner William Choy Wai-lin (right) says that disabled people excel at certain jobs. Photo: May Tse

After a stroke left him partially immobile and damaged his vision and memory a decade ago, Lo Chi-keung struggled to find a job. Things got a little easier two months ago when he was offered a job at Hong Lin Restaurant's Kwun Tong outlet.

Lo had been mostly idle for the past decade, so the former owner of a design company has found it hard to adapt to the seven-hour shift and demands of the job.

"My legs are tired from all the standing. I can't juggle many tasks at the same time as my memory is poor. I need to do my working duties, such as ladling soup and arranging cutlery, one at a time and do them slowly," says Lo, 47.

The Hong Kong Federation of Handicapped Youth Association, which provided vocational training and helped Lo secure the restaurant job, has helped to smooth his transition into full-time employment. It works with his wife, Pun Oi-yin, to help boost his memory and ease his muscle pain.

"We taught his wife to revise all the job procedures with him every night after work," says Chan Sau-fong, a social worker with the federation, which offers training programmes to help stroke victims return to the workplace.

"He bought a special pair of shoes with thick soles, and those make standing for long periods easier. We also explained to his employer that stroke victims with damaged memories have to stick to the same job duties in the beginning. Changes to job routines should be avoided.

"When Lo first came to us, he couldn't find his way home after training. He has since shown a marked improvement. Now, he goes to work on time and relishes the confidence that comes with earning a living again."

Disabled people like Lo encounter great difficulties in finding jobs. In spite of rising awareness of their rights, discrimination against disabled people is still widespread among employers. They have doubts about their ability and work performance.

Census and Statistics Department figures from 2008 show that there are 126,400 disabled people (excluding those with mental disability) aged between 15 and 59 in

the city. Thirty-two per cent (41,000) of them are employed, a 12 per cent drop from 2001.

But occupational therapists, social workers and employers who embrace disabled employment say vocational rehabilitation and small adjustments to the workplace can help disabled people overcome the mental and physical shortcomings that come with their disabilities.

Ming Choi, an occupational therapist with the Hong Kong Physically Handicapped and Able-Bodied Association, says minor changes to the workplace are all that's needed. "Before and after a job placement, an occupational therapist goes to the workplace to observe the layout and give advice based on the disability," she says.

For example, those with weak lower body strength due to a physical handicap can have difficulty hoisting themselves up from a seated position. But if they slide their bodies near the edge of the seat and bow forward, the task becomes much easier. "We look at body mechanics and advise special postures and movements that help disabled people better navigate the workplace," Choi says.

Breaking down workplace duties into smaller components is another way to accommodate various disabilities. This can help to fully utilise the skills and abilities of disabled people, she says.

"It may sound cumbersome to employers who want to maximise staff productivity and minimise costs. But disabled employment is always a trade-off. Compared to able-bodied people, they might have limitations. But once they settle into the jobs, they do not leave easily."

William Choy Wai-lin, owner of Hong Lin Restaurant which has three outlets in Kowloon and the New Territories, knows the benefits of disabled employment. Over the past three years, Choy has employed more than 30 disabled staff members. He currently employs 19.

It is not a charitable venture, Choy says. Employing disabled workers helped him cope with a staff shortage that occurred after the minimum wage laws were implemented. The problem worsened after the recent exodus of catering staff to Macau.

"Disabled staff have a low turnover rate, which helps maintain my business' stability," he says.

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Christian Ross, of sports retailer Escapade, is planning to hire disabled staff. Ross had his left leg amputated after suffering cancer. Photo: Nora Tam

Choy overcomes the challenges of having disabled staff by dividing work flow into separate procedures. There are a range of duties involved in running a restaurant. He assigns work in a way that the disabilities have little effect on the employees' job performance.

For example, a mentally disabled person may not be good at communicating, but would be competent at a task that involved little communication, such as cleaning tables or delivering food. A physically disabled person may have difficulty moving around, but could work in a stationary job such as that of cashier.

"From my experience, [disabled staff] do not have memory problems. They can be adept in fulfilling duties like baking and preparing food after repetitive practice," Choy says.

Caritas Lok Mo Integrated Vocational Training Centre collaborates with Choy in providing training and work for disabled people. The centre's occupational therapist, Kwan Hoi-tin, says employers should advise able-bodied staff on how to communicate with the disabled to make it easier for them to adapt to the workplace.

"For example, autistic people avoid eye contact with others, and some repeat what is said to them. This parroting behaviour does not

mean they do not understand the commands. Autistic staff at the restaurant bake tarts or wash dishes. While they are not good at communicating, they are loyal, have better concentration and do not get bored by monotonous tasks."

The loyalty of disabled staff is prized by information technology company Automated Systems. It employs 20 disabled staff, most of whom suffer from physical disabilities and hearing impairments. The staff mainly work in the digital imaging centre where job duties consist of data entry.

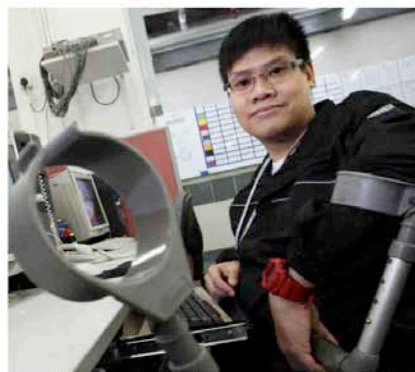
One such employee is Raymond Leung Wai-man. He has been working at Automated Systems for 10 years, scanning documents and performing data management work. A congenital defect weakened Leung's muscles, so he can't walk without the help of crutches.

Catherine Cheng Wai-sze, vice-president of human resources at Automated Systems, says the company broadened the office corridors before welcoming the disabled staff. "It only needs small gestures, like lowering the keyboards, to employ physically disabled staff," she says.

"We have also sought the advice of the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf on how to communicate with the hearing impaired. We offer sign-language courses for our able-bodied staff."

The government should introduce a quota system in which companies with over 100 staff set aside 2 per cent for the disabled

DR FERNANDO CHEUNG, LECTURER, POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY



Raymond Leung has worked at Automated Systems for 10 years. Only slight changes at work were needed to accommodate him. Photo: David Wong

Christian Ross, head of human resources with sports retailer Escapade, plans to employ disabled staff as part of the company's corporate responsibility drive. He says they will work in areas such as logistics and administration.

Ross, whose left leg was amputated after a battle with sarcoma, a cancer, 26 years ago, knows that a disability does not hinder work performance. "It only takes some small adjustments to get around the difficulties," says Ross, an enthusiastic swimmer. For example, Ross places heavy files of papers in a backpack instead of carrying them in his hands.

Local employers have yet to understand the advantages of disabled employment, says Dr Fernando Cheung Chiu-hung, a former social welfare sector legislator and lecturer with Polytechnic University's department of applied social sciences.

"Small and medium-sized businesses do not want to take on the burden of revamping office settings and installing disabled-friendly facilities," he says.

"The government should introduce a quota system like in Taiwan and Japan, where companies with more than 100 staff have to set aside 2 per cent of their positions for disabled people." Elaine Yau@scmp.com

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