



Press Release

BUSINESS & DISABILITY EVENT CALLS FOR IMPROVED EU WORKPLACE INCLUSIVENESS

European Parliament, Brussels – 17 June 2005. Business & Disability: a European Network issued a clear rallying call for a more inclusive workplace at their successful keynote event in the European Parliament yesterday.

The event, hosted by UK Labour MEP Richard Howitt, was strongly attended and involved participation from high level European Commission representatives, key figures of disability organisations and prominent business leaders.

With a focus on promoting inclusion through physical Accessibility, e-Accessibility and Employment the event succeeded in highlighting the need to break through the barriers faced by people with disabilities in the business environment. During the meeting, European Commission officials Odile Quintin, General Director, DG Employment and Social Affairs and Michel Ayrat, Director, Regulatory Policy, DG Enterprise and Industry gave a presentation on the policy approach to a business world, which Mrs Quintin summarized eloquently as *“focussing on the ability behind disability.”* People with disabilities, she stressed, *“do not want favours. They want the opportunity to prove their abilities and skills, to have the option to work, to earn a decent wage and provide for their families.”*

Legislation plays one role in creating such opportunities, for example in the harmonization of accessibility standards as called for by Inma Placencia, Deputy Head of DG Information Society’s E-Inclusion Unit. However, *“non-discrimination legislation must be accompanied by awareness raising measures to break down prejudice and lack of understanding on the part of employers”* as MEP Howitt pointed out. Welcoming the initiative taken by the members of Business & Disability he said *“you as business leaders are arguably in a better position to convince your ‘peers’ of the benefits of employing disabled persons and how this can be achieved.”*

Rodolfo Cattani, Executive Officer of the European Disability Forum (EDF), strongly supported this rallying call expressing his hope that more companies will join the network and commit and contribute to reaching the objective of an inclusive business world and society. Furthermore, Catherine Rubens of CSR Europe, saw the focus on an inclusive workplace for people with disabilities into more company’s diversity and/or CSR programs as a means to achieve these goals.

To this end, Business & Disability will reach out to companies across Europe continuing to promote the business case for an inclusive workplace. Dedicated events presenting best business practices of inclusion will be organised in five Member States in 2005 and six additional Member States in 2006, Mr Michael Takemura, Director Accessibility Worldwide, Hewlett-Packard, explained.



With an ageing population Europe simply cannot afford to continue neglecting the economic potential of people with disabilities. Mr Takemura, Mr Julien Ghez, Director Accessibility Center, IBM EMEA, and Jorge Ligüerre, Senior Vice-President Schindler Europe agreed that companies need to recognise the significant purchasing power of people with disabilities and the added value “Design for All” brings to the business world. As Mr Liguierre said, “*Design for All should be incorporated into the professional DNA of architects and product developers*”, acknowledging disabled people as customers and enabling them to take their opportunities in the business world.

Members of Business & Disability are under no illusion that it will be easy to achieve set objectives. However, they are committed to their cause or as Mr Jérôme Caille, CEO of Adecco and Keith Faulkner, Managing Director of Working Links, a Manpower joint venture company put it: “*We do not trivialise the challenges that lie ahead. We will have to work hard to bring about change. However, for us to succeed we need to allow society to capitalise on the skills and enthusiasm people with disabilities can bring to their workplaces.*”

The event ended with strong agreement among the participants that more must be done to promote inclusion as a key policy objective in order to realise the potential gains of integrating people with disabilities into all areas of business. A clear message has gone out to the business and policy world that these gains are in reach.

The call to action delivered in Brussels today, is set to be followed up by concrete actions throughout Europe, which Business & Disability: a European Network will implement starting in 2005 in Spain, France, Germany, Sweden, and Poland.

The founding members of Business & Disability are Adecco, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Manpower, Microsoft and Schindler. These companies are proud to be working in partnership with the European Disability Forum.

Membership is open to companies and National and EU non-governmental organisations who share the objectives of the Network.

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