

## **WORKING WITH A HANDICAP**

SIX MULTINATIONALS ARE MAKING EVERY EFFORT TO STOP DISCRIMINATING AGAINST EMPLOYEES WITH A HANDICAP

**Barely 1  
handicapped  
person in 5 finds  
work**

**Hiring people with a handicap can be done without incurring much cost, yet virtually no-one dares to do it.** Six multinationals, including HP and Adecco, are now setting a good example. Their employees with a disability are developing products and services that can help you to do the same thing. So what are you waiting for?

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**Marleen Teugels**

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People with a handicap find it particularly tough when it comes to the job market. Even more difficult than women or ethnic minorities, indicates research. Out of the 50 million Europeans with a handicap, barely 20 to 25 per cent are in the workforce. Six companies are now joining hands to put an end to this dreadful discrimination. On Thursday, their *Business & Disability Forum* tabled a number of plans designed to lower the threshold for the first time - both literally and figuratively.

The rapidly increasing greying of our population means that the 'normal' world is becoming inaccessible for more and more people. "All of our products, website and information are accessible to everyone," says **Michael Takemura**, who is responsible for accessibility worldwide at HP. "Using this accessible technology, most people can get ahead without having to spend too much." Mr Takemura knows what he is talking about, because a car accident on his 19th birthday landed him in a wheelchair. "When you have a handicap yourself, or work with people who are disabled, you are more alert to the barriers and can come up with creative solutions," he says. "The same is true with our partners, small technology companies, which generally gain strength from people with a handicap or the people around them.

These partners make our products accessible for specific target audiences. For example, a Canadian partner has adapted our iPAQ Pocket PC for blind users. As a result of the cooperation with Microsoft, our partners are able to work quickly and cheaply with the fast-evolving software."

Demand for adapted technology is particularly big. At HP, 'accessibility' is one of its fastest-growing niche markets. "American and European governments are among our biggest customers," says Mr Takemura. "To be able to provide everyone with the same right to accessibility, uniform worldwide standards are an absolute necessity."

**EVERYONE EQUAL**

HP also conducts a consistent policy of diversity internally. The company selects new employees purely on the basis of their talent, regardless of the colour of their skin, gender, personal inclinations or handicap. "There are also people with disabilities working for our customers and partners," says Mr Takemura. "They benefit from the solutions developed by our employees with a handicap. People who suffer from a disability also seem to be outstanding problem-solvers."

IBM also switches off any form of discrimination during its job application procedures. "For example, a blind researcher developed the IBM Home Page Reader that makes the Internet more accessible for people who are blind or with poor sight," says Edith Jonkers, manager workforce diversity at IBM. "In a number of countries, we also supervise students who have a disability during their studies and training so that they can gain work experience. Our aim is to be doing the same thing here in Belgium by the end of 2005."



**Michael Takemura, disability manager HP.**

"Demand for adapted technology is particularly big. At HP, 'accessibility' is one of its fastest-growing niche markets. American and European governments are among our biggest customers."

<b>What can people with disabilities do for you?</b>
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• They are outstanding problem-solvers.</li><li>• They make their workmates more alert about thresholds, and more creative.</li><li>• They are a growing group of consumers themselves</li></ul> |
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## TEMPORARY WORK AS A WAY IN

The fact that it is perfectly possible to employ people with a disability can also be seen from experience in the world of temporary employment. In 2004, for example, Adecco employed 9500 people in Europe with a handicap. In Wallonia, the company is working closely with the 'Agence Wallonne pour l'intégration des personnes handicapées'. If a person with a disability has been unemployed for a long period of time, the government then provides subsidies to help him or her find work. These subsidies are divided between Adecco and its client. Adecco has already employed 53 people with a disability in this way since October 2004. The company is now also beginning a similar project in Flanders.

The companies in the Business & Disability Forum are working together to force a change in attitude and are showing the right example at the same time. Education is a crucial target group for the Forum. People with a disability still often achieve success in separate ways. In particular, they attend training courses and work in specially adapted workplaces, while the computer industry is interested in staff with higher education qualifications. Mentorships for university students are also designed to turn the tide. The Forum is also arguing for the introduction of a new subject,

'accessibility', in a number of courses (human resources, engineering, architecture).

Helena Gonzalez-Sancho is a member of the European Disability Forum as an NGO. She hopes that these good practices will shake other companies awake. "This involves a gigantic group of people who are excluded," she says. "These same people also constitute a growing group of consumers. Associations of handicapped people have for years been trying to convince business of the major advantages of diversity in the workplace. But without much success. We hope that these messages are getting through now that they are coming from the companies themselves."

### LINKS

Business & Disability Forum  
[www.businessanddisability.org](http://www.businessanddisability.org)

difference in the loss of performance. Unfortunately, applications for this payment go hand in hand with a huge stack of paperwork. The same applies to reimbursement for the adaptations required for the workplace. Can't the government simplify this administrative merry-go-round?"

**50 million: that's how many Europeans are living with a disability.**

**20-25% of people with a disability in Europe have a job. In the US, 30% work.**

NOTE: This is the English translation of the original Dutch article, which was published in *Vacature* (a weekly newspaper in Belgium).

### **What is Belgium doing for workers with a disability?**

"If we actually want to help people with a disability to find jobs, then the government still has quite a lot of work to do," says René Vastmans, chairman of the Belgian Disability Forum. "If people with a handicap perform less well in the workplace, then the government makes up the