

Making the Blind Resources in India Work at Par with the Sighted Counterparts

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Executive Summary

The blind and handicapped youth in India have been the least represented in the mainstream workforce. Their numbers exceed 20 million and this number is too large to remain unproductive. Such a large unutilized population is a drag to the economy and upsets the socioeconomic equilibrium that is vital for a resurgent society. Innovative approaches to tackle this problem need social innovation and thereby create a model where both the handicapped beneficiaries and their employers benefit in a win-win situation. This is absolutely necessary for a sustained growth and a meaningful solution to this problem. Nabet India has pioneered a model of employment for the disabled people in India. This model is designed to create employment avenues by seeking outsourced jobs, which are executed by those trained and nurtured under the aegis of Nabet's skill development center. Regular employment for the disabled not only directly helps the handicapped but also uplifts the family by economically empowering them, and equips them with resources and skills required in the corporate workforce. Training is done

in a manner which maps the individual's ability with the identified job roles from the industry. Special software, assistive devices and a well-researched, government-approved course curriculum designed with industry consultation is provided free of charge to the beneficiaries.

Nabet India is a social organization working towards the employment of people with disabilities through entrepreneurial skill ventures.

The transformative power of innovative concepts in bringing about positive changes in a socioeconomic landscape is a subject that draws the attention of one and all. The social and economic impact of few such transformations in the past have revolutionized the way we look at situations and challenges. Social transformations, in particular, affect the lives of many; the need for innovation affecting the lives of hundreds and thousands of disabled and handicapped is even more pronounced. To identify and deliver on social goals is a huge positive that charges up an individual to address challenges that confront society.

The unique ability to identify new resources where more wealth can be created or reconfigure existing resources to enhance wealth-creating potential is entrepreneurship. Many useful and creative ideas often emerge from those who are confronted with situations that are unexpected, incongruent and need purposeful resolution. To devise

workable solutions to emergent situations that increase utilization of resources is also entrepreneurship. Wealth generation can also be attributed to developing a trained, quality workforce. Creation of a pool of talented but under-utilized resources capable of performing tasks that addresses the need of the industry is desirable. These resources in turn facilitate wealth creation for the industry. When we map entrepreneurship to solve a social problem then it gives rise to a new category of entrepreneurship – Social Entrepreneurship.

Social Innovation - The Indian Perspectives

The disabled population is a largely unutilized workforce. A developing country like India is home to millions of physically challenged people. The visually impaired (blind) constitute almost 10 million. Most of these people are poor and uneducated. The education qualifications of such people are well below the national average. Consequently, such people do not find employment and as a result are left out of the benefits of a growing economy. Unemployment creates a variety of social and economic hardships. The government too finds it difficult to address the basic needs of food, housing, healthcare, etc. The meager social welfare budgets are already overstretched and bursting at the seams. Government support schemes are woefully inadequate to address their minimum needs.

Whereas these issues pose tremendous challenges, there

is hope as well. Present-day industry needs a large pool of trained workers who can perform certain tasks for its business needs. Such jobs are primarily skill-based and not education-based. Moreover, the education system does not often match skills requirements and this mismatch is an entrepreneurial opportunity.

The need to address this social issue, that can offer a service-based solution to a pressing industry need, and also the issue of employment of the disabled has never been more acute. There is a need to identify the specific skills required by industry and develop them to enable execution of tasks.

Ocean of Opportunities

The advent of technology, particularly the IT sector, has opened many job avenues. Nabet India, a social organization working for the skill development of the visually impaired, has identified some of these jobs, though many more need to be explored. Accessibility testing of new software/products, call center operations, service-related operations in insurance and marketing sector, database management, service feedback in a variety of sectors ranging from automobile to infrastructure companies to service based companies, etc. are some of the identified areas.

Many companies have benefitted from services offered by our trained blind/handicapped resources. Most of the

companies suffer from loss/attrition of trained workers. Job switch/migration of a healthy, non-handicapped worker adversely affects the industry. Attrition costs weigh heavily on industries—manpower training costs, resource acquisition costs, etc. adversely affect businesses. Moreover, rebuilding new workers to the performance levels of exiting ones takes time and affects growth. Nabet India's trained blind/handicapped workers offer the much-needed stability and continuity of personnel. This helps management plan its activities and growth trajectory. The blind/handicapped find regular sources of employment and steady income. It is a win-win situation for both, and a proven model of social structuring and sustainable growth.

Getting the Blind Job Ready

The blind interact with computers by using special screen reader software called JAWS (Job Access With Speech). Highly skilled trainers who have proven abilities to augment the skill set of a handicapped worker are deployed to conduct this training program. The course curriculum is tailored to meet the industry requirement and also keep in mind the present abilities of the beneficiaries. The course curriculum is dynamic and is designed in consultation with the industry. Special software, assistive devices and a rigorous training schedule are utilized to meet expected industry standards. After completion of the course, which usually

takes 30 to 36 weeks, employers are invited to examine our trainees and select them purely on merit and the qualities that one seeks in prospective candidates.

More Work Yet to Be Done

Accessibility of the workplace, and overall creation of handicap-friendly access, architecturally and otherwise, are important aspects to create work friendly environment. However, these may not be enough to garner full potential of such resources. What is more important is to identify such jobs within the industry that can be carried out by the handicapped workers. There are, for instance, many jobs that require IT-trained people to carry out various services. These include database management, customer service management, record keeping, etc. Industries can help themselves by employing disabled workers to carry out these tasks. Moreover, creation of internally trained workers helps augment resources effectively and at low costs. Making architectural changes for a handicapped friendly environment is a high-cost investment, whereas internal mobilization of resources is a low-cost option. Such an intervention will spur the industry to look within and maximize productivity.

To create a work environment where handicapped people can work from home/remote locations has been successful in certain areas. Experienced trainers guide them to attain desired performance levels and, once

trained, these employees are given an option to work from home. Travel agency executives, financial investment executives, insurance policy advisers, and a host of such professions have been successfully incorporated into training and placement for handicapped workers. It is heartening to see that some have grown in their ventures and become entrepreneurs, too.

Show the Way and the World Follows

When we started our social innovation model in the industrial town of Manesar 7 years ago, we were told that this effort to have disabled and able-bodied workers working together should be more charity-driven rather than achieving the paid employment model that we had envisaged. As weeks turned to months and months to years, more and more beneficiaries saw merit in our approach and also in themselves. The industries who were initially reluctant to outsource work to us have now come forward to give more outsourced work and also offer direct employment to our trainees. Today around 750 disabled youths find regular employment in the industry around Manesar and it is through this initiative that several more job roles are being identified.

Corporations come forward to either outsource work or absorb them on their own payrolls. Nabet India's innovative approach has led to many other social entrepreneurship ventures in Manesar.

For similar successful model to be replicated in other

parts of the country and throughout the world it is necessary that entrepreneurship be backed by advocacy. Big corporate and social organizations backing such initiatives will maximize the impact.

To see more of the work of Nabet India, please visit www.nabetindia.org.

About the author

Abhishek Mishra is the COO of Nabet India, an NGO committed to enabling the visually impaired and handicapped to achieve meaningful employment, having trained hundreds of students from all over India.