

The new green

Business may find disability as important as environmentalism



Curious about the code in the daytime

IF CHIEF executives won medals, Justin King of J. Sainsbury, a British supermarket chain, would be sporting a gold in the marketing marathon for his prescient decision to concentrate sponsorship on the Paralympics rather than the glitzier Olympics. The plaudits he and other companies have received for backing what was previously seen as a sideshow could help change corporate attitudes to disability.

Caroline Casey of Kanchi, a non-profit organisation she founded in 2004, says the cause is “the new green”. Starting in Ireland and then in Spain, Kanchi’s Ability Awards highlight companies that deal with disabled employees and customers. Now in partnership with Telefónica, a Spanish telecoms giant, it plans to hold the awards in other countries too, including Britain, Germany and Brazil.

In this section

Jorge Perez of Manpower, an employment-services firm, says disabled people frequently have unusually high productivity. Thorkil Sonne, the founder of Specialisterne, a Danish firm that finds high-tech jobs for autistic people, says they can focus on repetitive tasks that might be boring to other workers. Britain’s electronic-espionage centre, GCHQ, (pictured) eagerly recruits people with autism and Asperger’s syndrome. Their ability to spot patterns can make them ace code-crackers.

But to show their talents, disabled people must first get the job. Susan Scott-Parker of the Employer’s Forum on Disability, a British auditing group, notes that many firms still fall down on basics, such as using online application forms that deter blind people.

Disabled people are not just potential employees. While working at Merrill Lynch, Rich Donovan, who has cerebral palsy, looked at disabled people as an emerging market and found it much bigger than he expected: “1.1 billion people, that’s the size of China.” He noted two trends. A generation of people who had benefited from disability laws is coming out of education and into work; second, as the baby boomers age, disabilities are spreading rapidly.

That means rising demand for products and services for this unprecedentedly wealthy and consumerist generation.

Yet when he analysed companies in the S&P 500 index, Mr Donovan—who now runs his own firm—found that only a quarter had a strategy aimed at these markets and only 6% were doing serious business in them. He has devised a “Return on Disability” index, which tracks the shares of the 100 firms that deal best with disabled people. Over the past five years it has outperformed the broader stockmarket. Later this month Bloomberg will include this on its financial-information terminals.

Such approaches contrast with the way businesses usually look at disabled people: as charity cases, or as needing lots of box-ticking compliance rules and as the source of annoying lawsuits. Good treatment can make business sense, too.

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