

**WHO World Disability Report 2011,Asia Pacific Symposium
at University of Sydney, December 5th & 6th 2011
presentation by Thomas Ng, founder of Genashtim Innovative Learning**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to share with you how my business is run by majority PWD, and also some of my views on the WHO World Disability Report.

We practise a very simple management principle. We assemble a team, knowing and leveraging the strengths of team members, knowing the weaknesses (“handicaps”) of team members, and finding ways to overcome or compensate them. We look at PWD like any employee who is not perfect – **nobody is**.

May I quote this profound statement from Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, Secretary General of ASEAN:-
“The are not disabled in everything....zero in and expand on the abilities that they have and develop those qualities.”

A very important enabler for us is the internet. It makes remote work feasible. By extending this to a work-from-home model, we have levelled the playing field for most PWD. The real impediment for meaningful employment for most PWD is mobility, especially in less developed countries.

We choose to be in Education, and we chose Online education, and a work-from-home model because:-

- It is more friendly to the environment – less commuting, less congestion, less consumption of fuel & materials, less waste and less pollution.
- It is more accessible to PWD, not only in availing of the service, but also in being engaged in its delivery.

We started with the two Executive Education brands U21Global and eCornell. Two years ago, we launched our own English and Chinese live one-on-one language services (EPiC Online and CNPiC Online), and we are in the process of launching a remote PC support service (Abled Online).

As you can see, our PWD are scattered and integrated into all aspects of our organization (show organization chart). We have PWD working for us all over the Philippines, in China, and recently, in Malaysia. We have been trying to recruit in India and in Cambodia.

We have about 50 people on our payroll today, and about 30 of them are PWD. Our target is to grow to 1,000 in the next 3 years, and maintain at least 50% PWD. I realize that we are just scratching the surface now, and hope by then, we can make a small dent.

I would like to stress that our PWD are in meaningful mainstream work. They are strategically engaged and integrated in the business, serving multinational clients in multi countries. They actually make the business stronger. This is not about charity, sympathy nor philanthropy. They get paid like everyone else, and they get fired if they do not perform. We make no excuses to our clients for quality and reliability.

Some of our most prominent clients, are McDonalds, Regent Hotels, Air Asia, ABB, and Kaplan institute, who have given us satisfaction ratings ranging from 88% to 98%.

- In particular, with Taylors Education Group in Malaysia, we are providing mock IELTS oral tests to their students who are switching from the local language medium of education to A levels, and would like to progress to foreign universities.

Since my experience has been around providing sustainable mainstream employment for PWD, I will focus my comments on Chapter 8 of the World Disability Report - Work & Employment.

Changing attitudes is mentioned often in the report, and also mentioned by Alana in her presentation. Janet, in her response to a question listed this as the main issue, and so did Graeme in response to Maryanne's question from Queensland, regarding the very critical concept of trying to move away from a deficit model.

May I humbly offer my observations on the traditional approaches to changing attitudes, which are typically the "by FORCE" options like:-

- Lobbying for rights, legislation, anti discrimination laws
- Quotas
- Equal wage demands
- Employment regulations, labour laws

If it increases costs to a business, it will drive profits down, and the PWD will be considered a "necessary evil" by businesses. I don't believe this is sustainable, and this certainly is not very dignified for the PWD.

Quotas have a tendency to lead to "style over substance". I have seen this happen so often. Businesses might not be run by good or honorable people, but they are generally run by smart people. So they will find a way to window-dress, to comply with quotas and other mandatory requirements.

The concept of equal wages can be rather amusing. My very good friend Guy Russo is the CEO of Kmart Australia. I am at least as well educated as he is - he started his career as a janitor in McDonalds. I am bigger than him, and I am pretty sure that I can run faster and jump higher than him. Then why on earth can he earn multiple times the salary which I can?

The answer is rather simple - he was given the **opportunity to perform** and he can **produce results** that justify his salary. Hence I believe that we should be focusing on providing the opportunity for the PWD, and the PWD on the other hand, have to produce the results. I think this is the key that will unlock a lot of things.

From my observation, labor laws and regulations tend to be designed to restrict the bad employer and protect the bad employee. I am not sure how useful they can be for us in our quest for sustainable mainstream employment for the PWD. In the Philippines, for example, labour laws are such that even the best and biggest companies tend to hire people only on 6 month contracts. This is to avoid having too many permanent employees who are hard to get rid of in case of business downturn, and contractual employees cannot form unions. I wonder how Guy Russo's career could have developed, if he were initially hired on 6 month contracts only.

We need to encourage businesses to employ and give a chance to anyone who is determined to work. In Genashtim, our only criteria to hire someone is their attitude, and their determination to want to change their lives. If they have that, we will give them a try. If they do not make it, they have to make room for someone else. If we could not do this, then we will not be able to hire PWD, who typically come from impoverished environments, are poorly educated, with little exposure to the commercial world, and with little or no working experience. Even without considering their physical disabilities, they will not pass even initial screening by some junior HR person in any organization.

Rather than by force, I strongly urge that we try to change attitudes by enticement. Let's look for those companies who are in Inclusive Business, and help to market and promote them. The scarce promotional material which I have seen so far are too "motherhood and apple pie", and hence not convincing to businesses. We need to focus on showing how these business can be successful with PWD employees, and exactly how these PWD can be productive. We need to get customer testimonials - all I see so far are testimonials from the PWD and their employers.

We should also put our money where our mouths are. This symposium must have cost a pretty penny. How much of it is being spent on Inclusive Businesses? I am not suggesting that we pay more - far from it. I strongly believe that Inclusive Businesses have to be competitive and profitable. Otherwise it is not sustainable.

For example, you could avail of Genashtim's services to help improve the language and PC skills of other PWD, so that they too can work from home to serve the global economy as well. You will then be killing several birds with one stone. More than half of our staff are PWD. Hence whatever you spend on us is already helping them. Plus the service we provide will benefit more PWD, and hopefully also put them into employment.

We need to encourage and create more Inclusive Businesses. I am part of an initiative funded by The Nippon Foundation, where we are working with the Asia Pacific Center for Disability to come up with a certification process for Inclusive businesses. Such a certification will lead to more companies getting involved, and increased funding possibilities for certified companies.

We need people to get used to the habit of using PWD. I am used to having a blind secretary. I am used to having people in wheelchairs work on my PC remotely. This is pretty much how our company works. . When we did our first Chinese Online trials for Air Asia, we passed without them being aware that all the Chinese Language Coaches that we used in the trials were blind.

We need to make other people get used to this. Think about it - for most of you in the audience, there are many things which you need to get done, can be done by PWD, if you set it up right. If we do not start, then how do you expect the rest of the world to do so?

Beyond this, we need to show how the PWD can be an advantage as an employee. Page 236 of the World Disability Report lists appropriate skills, strong loyalty, and low rates of absenteeism. Furthermore, in order to unlock their potential, focus on capacity to work, not disability (as mentioned in page 248 of the World Disability Report), and craft cross-disability processes.

May I share with you some examples in our organization:-

- Ryan, a polio victim confined to a wheelchair since he was two, was living in a temporary structure, working freelance on the internet off and on. He was hired as an Virtual Assistant for Genashtim in Sep 2009. Three months later, he was promoted to a Business Development. role. By Sep 2010, he headed the Abled Online project as its General Manager. In Nov 2010, he presented the project in Tokyo and "walked away" with the first prize. He is now concurrently head of IT for Genashtim, and also acting Operations Manager for EPIC Online. A year after he joined Genashtim, his monthly income was 6 times the most he ever made working freelance.

- in the sales team for our eCornell business, enquiries on our website are picked up by a deaf person, who communicates by SMS and email with the prospective client. If a call is needed, another team member who is blind, takes over. Registration of students, is done by one of our staff with Aspergers Syndrome. All team members live in different parts of the country, have never met in person, but communicate regularly on the internet.
- Mariecell was about to graduate from college in 2002, when a car accident disfigured her face, and destroyed both her eyes. Because she had learnt how to use the computer and the internet as a blind person, she was hired as a secretary, working from her home in Davao, Philippines. But as a blind person, there were things which she could not do by herself, like reading scanned documents, and filling out forms. Mariecell is now being paired with En-en, who was stricken by polio since she was 2. En-en works from her home in Cagayan de Oro. Mariecell and En-en have never met in person. Together, Mariecell and En-en provide secretarial support to an executive who lives in Melbourne, and travels 70% of the time. He has never met either of them in person. But they communicate online every day.
- We have 3 blind secretaries who, supported by non VI PWD, serve 5 managers in our organization. The blind tend to have better communication skills. The other PWD, not so, which means it is harder to have them deal directly with clients. This is a planned new business for us – Genie Online – “your wish is our command”.

There is a lot to be done, and there is a lot that can be done now. There are challenges along the way. The World Disability Report has identified some of these:-

- Page 237 - incremental costs. This is for both the employer and the PWD. In particular in under-developed countries, the public transportation and society-at-large are not friendly for PWD. Assistants/guides are almost always needed for them to commute, and it can be quite dangerous.
- Pages 237, 246, 248 - in the more developed countries, the social benefit structure often disincentivizes PWD to work.
- On page 247, the World Disability Report indentifies some “core life skills” like discipline, punctuality, obedience, responsibility, personality development, communication skills which need to be developed in PWD. And on page 246, highlights the benefit of early intervention.

I cannot agree with this more. Our experience shows that it is not the physical disability which constrains the PWD in mainstream employment, but rather their attitude and emotional state. I believe that NGOs, DPOs, and NPOs have a big role to play in changing this.

Lastly, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to share with you my favorite quote in the World Disability Report (page 249):-

“At Light (energy company in Brazil), the number of workers with disabilities is greater than that required by law. The reason is simple- for us, the most important thing is to have valuable people.”

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope that we can all work together to make the PWD more valuable!