

Online Learning Institute Genashtim

'Indifferent' work methods design: physical disabilities not impeding profession

What job would you pursue if you lose your eyesight unexpectedly? As a person with visual impairment, you might not feel inclined to work as a massage therapist or a lottery seller but it does seem like there are not very many choices of work for people with disabilities (PWDs). However, it is an established fact that PWDs are as much able to work as able-bodied persons. Hence, PWDs should not have such limited job choices.

Genashtim, a company in Singapore, almost exclusively employs PWDs, providing online learning programs and services. The company employs people with various types of disabilities, comprising of full-time and part-time staff. Genashtim's customers include Thailand's McDonald's, the American Holiday Inn Hotel Groups, retailers Kmart Australia branch, and other large enterprises.

When Genashtim's Founder and CEO, Thomas Ng, heard that blind people use the computer to work, he was skeptical. "Perhaps my thought process was average and reptilian," Thomas says. However, when I witnessed them use the computer like it is their second nature, I was really impressed."

He saw, purely by chance, that with computer tools and systematic training, visually impaired persons can work as efficiently as people with good eyesight.

What he saw made him think: PWDs are only bodily afflicted. Their professional abilities are intact and can be refined. Yet, their physical limitations greatly restrict employment opportunities. Thence the idea to set up an 'indifferent' work environment was realized by Thomas in establishing Genashtim where PWDs and general workers function as a cohesive operation unit. Since Genashtim is a for-profit social enterprise, it got the B Corporation certification.

Thomas had to rethink and redesign enterprise structures and working methods considering that most PWDs have trouble going out by themselves. He came up with a working process that only needs Internet connection at home.

Remote interview and work reduce the mobility barriers faced by PWDs.

Genashtim conducts interviews in stages. In the first stage, an interviewee logs into the Genashtim network platform to make the first appointment. Then, the interviewee will receive a video in which Thomas briefly introduces the ropes of the virtual office and the work content. After that, the interviewee is required to give a cursory self-introduction and work expectations through a video.

In the second stage, Thomas would invite all the team supervisors to discuss if the interviewee is suited for the job. The interview process is similar to how all the other enterprises conduct their interviews.

The selection process is rigorous; each candidate is carefully considered before they are hired for a position and work content. For example, a Genashtim employee who worked as a computer engineer before meeting with an accident that left him with bodily paralysis can still use the computer with the assistance of speech recognition software. So, Thomas recognised his ability to work and appointed him as a system engineer.

At a time where education is conducted online, formal work is not an exception; hence, Genashtim neither has a physical office nor needs one. Thomas says that under the 'natural' restrictions occurring in his company's architecture, Genashtim retains the 'extra' advantages, "We eliminated energy consumption in a physical office, greatly save papers, and achieve the goals of environmental protection."

Attracting customers by an emphasis on professional service, not by charity.

Since the system does not involve face to face interaction, most customers are unaware that the staff who provides the services is disabled. Thomas says that at the beginning, he worried so much that customers will think that his staff's health will affect the quality of the services, but since the system launched in 2008, the weekly customer satisfaction survey shows that the average scores are above 4.8 (the full scores are 5).

“Let customers believe that Genashtim is a company that can provide professional services purely based on quality.” Thomas stressed that relevant information about the employees is put on the website, but there is no initiative to inform the public and the customers that the staff members are PWDs. This is because Genashtim does not position itself as a 'charity' enterprise so, it does not emphasise the particularity of the employees to attract the public's benevolence.

In the interview, Thomas demonstrated the process of connecting to and meeting his staff members. “My personal manager identifies and recruits suitable candidates to join us and they usually hail from the Philippines, China and Malaysia.” Thomas then carefully introduced his right-hand man, Villy. Villy suffered a major car accident that caused paralysis before graduating from university, so, he could not get a college degree. However, Villy joined the company 14 years ago and he got frequent job promotions due to his professionalism and work performance.

"They lost some things in life, but they are still strong," Thomas said with great emotion. There is always someone thanking him, for setting up Genashtim and providing PWDs with more job opportunities, but he thinks he gets more from his employees, quoting that 'even if the ship of destiny sinks to the bottom of the sea, it will still struggle to jump out by its own efforts'.

Text under the photos in the article

1. Through the design of remote work, Genashtim employs people from all over the world.

2. This logo consists of the image of a PWD and a notebook computer, which conveys the meaning that disability does not impinge one's professional ability.
3. Can the blind use a computer? The answer is "Yes!" They can operate a computer freely using speech recognition software.

Thomas Ng's profile

The CEO and Founder of Genashtim Innovative Learning in Singapore who has served in senior executive positions before committing to Genashtim after retirement.