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Businesses Push Inclusive Employment for Bottom Line

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KPMG's Yury Sidorov

Yury Sidorov was afraid he wouldn't find a job after he lost the use of his legs in a car accident five years ago.

“I thought employers wouldn't take me seriously. I thought people would treat me like an outcast and everybody would feel bad for me,” the 28-year-old said.

Sidorov had reason to worry: 84 percent of Russians with disabilities, 3.5 million people in all, are unemployed, according to government figures, and activists say that figure is an underestimate.

But with the help of a local NGO, Sidorov landed a job as an accountant at KPMG, an international auditing firm.

His story highlights a growing trend of companies in Russia hiring people with disabilities.

They say it's not about charity; it's about the bottom line. Inclusive hiring increases the quality of their applicants and creates a more cohesive staff and more nuanced solutions for customers, they argue.

Their market-based approach could do more to bring people with disabilities into the workforce and society than decades of government subsidies and quotas.

The obstacles to employment for people with disabilities in Russia are many and often start quite literally at the doorstep.

Although accessibility improvements have been made in recent years, Moscow remains a hazardous and often inaccessible city for people with visual or physical impairments.

Most buildings aren't wheelchair-accessible, and most sidewalks aren't equipped with special grooves for the visually impaired.

Combined with potholes, ice in the winter and cars roaming the sidewalks, it's enough to persuade many people with disabilities to stay home.

“The metro, apart from a few new stations, is completely inaccessible,” said Sidorov, who drives to work.

The other barriers to employment are primarily psychological. In the Soviet Union, “disabled” meant “unemployable,” and people with disabilities were seen as wards of the state to be pitied and taken care of.

This mentality has in part led to misconceptions that make employers reluctant to hire people with disabilities to this day, activists say.

At a recent roundtable, Yelena Arefyeva, chairwoman of the Business and Disability Council and HR director for DPD, a parcel delivery company, said that contrary to popular belief, people with disabilities are no more likely to take sick leave or be less qualified.

Also, they rarely require expensive infrastructure upgrades such as ramps and special lavatories. As for the supposed safety hazards, she said, people with disabilities are often the most safety-conscious.

“Seventy percent of public bus drivers in Finland are hearing-impaired. Their accident rate is practically zero compared with other drivers,” she said.

Natalya Isakovskaya, of media communications firm Vivaki, said people with disabilities are among the most positive, responsible, open and goal-oriented in her company.

“Lyosha Smirnov is always the first to turn on his computer. ... Ksyusha Sukhareva inspires us with her optimism and liveliness. Maxim Tolstikov teaches us to think abstractly and focus on the end result,” she said in e-mailed comments.

No special training is required to help other employees adjust to having co-workers with disabilities, she said.

Employees at the Clifford Chance law firm's Russian office had “no trouble” integrating people with disabilities, country manager Katie Clarke said in e-mailed comments.

Again and again, company representatives returned to the fact that hiring people with disabilities improves the overall quality of incoming staff by enlarging the applicant pool.

“We're coming up against a shortage of highly qualified and motivated workers. If we exclude people with disabilities from this pool of talented, dedicated, strong personalities, we're reducing the options available to our company,” said Yelena Timakova, an HR manager at KPMG.

Clifford Chance, Vivaki, KPMG and a handful of other companies are members of the Business and Disability Council, which helps promote inclusive employment.

The council sponsors the annual “Path to Careers” competition, which helped Sidorov get a job at KPMG two years ago.

Path to Careers prepares upperclassmen and recent graduates with disabilities to enter the job market, tutoring them on résumé writing, interviewing and other skills and connecting up to 20 finalists with potential employers.

“The skills are simple, but these things are hard to do when you're worried about how you're being perceived,” Sidorov said. “I became convinced, as a result, that there's nothing scary about being in a wheelchair.”

The program was created with the help of Perspektiva, one of the few NGOs in Russia that promote inclusive employment. It has placed more than 600 applicants in companies since 2003.

Council members stress that inclusive employment isn't about being kind, it's about accepting exceptional employees regardless of their disabilities.

“We don't create special jobs for people with disabilities,” Arefyeva said. “When a job opening appears, we interview people with disabilities as well as people without them.”

This is not to deny the human benefits of inclusive employment.

People with disabilities need jobs to become full members of society, and their presence in the workplace helps break down stereotypes generated by years of separation.

“People with disabilities especially need work, not just to pay the rent, but as a way of entering society,” Yevgenia Voskoboinikova, a Dozhd TV host who uses a wheelchair, said in an e-mail. “It's an awesome feeling to know you're bringing value to society. ... It makes going to work feel like going to a holiday celebration.”

Denise Roza, Perspektiva's director, said the government still doesn't recognize that it's better and cheaper to promote inclusive employment than to pour millions of dollars into quotas, subsidies and special businesses for people with disabilities.

Under a 2011 government framework on disabilities policy called “Accessible Environment,”

the government will set aside 950 million rubles ($28.6 million) per year through 2014 on special businesses, typically overseen by national societies for the blind, deaf and disabled.

The All-Russia Society for the Blind, which runs workshops countrywide producing everything from paintbrushes to furniture, won an additional 57 million ruble ($1.8 million) grant in 2010 and 64.8 million rubles ($2 million) in additional funds in 2011.

Perspektiva, the other winner in 2010, received 3.6 million rubles ($111,000).

Perhaps as a gesture of gratitude, the group quickly joined President Vladimir Putin's All-Russia People's Front, a confederation of pro-Kremlin NGOs, in May 2011.

“It's not our fault that other all-Russia organizations can't present more attractive programs,” Vladimir Vshivtsev, acting president of the All-Russia Society for the Blind, said when asked about why his group frequently won annual grants in addition to its yearly budget allotment.

Vshivtsev said that despite the federal subsidies, the society is a net contributor to the budget, with its 158 businesses across the country paying more than 1.4 billion rubles ($42 million) in taxes in 2011, he said in an e-mail.

The society had created 2,319 new jobs between 2006 and 2010 and planned to create 211 this year, he said.

While he lamented the labor status of people with disabilities, Vshivtsev said “Accessible Environment” and its predecessor showed the “serious attention” of the government.

“You have to keep in mind the number of social obligations that the government has, as well as the unstable global economy,” he said.

Vshivtsev said employment in private companies isn't realistic for many people with disabilities, especially the severely disabled and the visually impaired.

Two visually impaired protesters at a demonstration in early July said private companies would never hire them because of their disabilities.

Even after their City Hall-funded call center was shut down, leaving them without work, paychecks and working documents, Yury Boldin and Yury Milchakov said government-backed businesses were their only hope.

Mikhail Terentyev, a wheelchair user and State Duma Deputy who sits on the Labor and Social Policy Committee, also defended the government's efforts, citing a new requirement that all buildings be handicap-accessible starting Jan. 1.

He said a more effective incentives system — businesses are currently eligible to receive between 30,000 rubles ($900) and 50,000 rubles for hiring a person with disabilities — would be part of the solution, but he cautioned that the government alone couldn't undo years of negative stereotypes.

“Businesses need to understand that if a person with disabilities comes to them for a job, that

person has already overcome incredible obstacles. A person with that kind of drive is the best type of employee," he said on the sidelines of a roundtable on inclusive employment.

It remains to be seen whether the government will strengthen inclusive employment efforts now that Russia has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, which establishes a regular reporting regime for tracking the country's progress on the issue.

Mikhail Novikov, employment program director at Perspektiva, said the government increasingly has no choice but to adopt a more free-market approach.

"Only rich countries can afford not to boost employment," he said. "People with disabilities who don't work are a burden on the country's resources. They receive benefits and pensions at the expense of working people. They don't pay taxes; they don't contribute as much to society."

The federal government expects to spend 290 billion rubles ($8.72 billion) on payments to people with disabilities this year.

According to the International Labor Organization, the exclusion of disabled persons from the workforce may cost countries between 1 and 7 percent of GDP as a result of lost productive potential, the cost of disability benefits and pensions and implications for their families and careers.

But while the wheels of government bureaucracy slowly turn, the onus of hiring people with disabilities will continue to lie with companies.

"Employers have the choice to look at people with disabilities just as they would at other people," Sidorov said. "They shouldn't have mental barriers against people with disabilities. ... Try hiring one. Give that person a chance to show his or her value."

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