

Transcript of audio report:

interview with Simon Brown, Inclusive Futures formal employment programme

[Introductory male voice] Hi and thanks for tuning in. You are listening to an Inclusive Futures audio report, brought to you by our global reporting team.

[Introductory female voice] Hi, I'm Kim, the global reporter for Inclusive Futures. I spoke to Simon Brown who is the economic expert on the formal employment programme. We discussed the work and the impact that COVID-19 is having on young jobseekers with disabilities.

[Simon] My name is Simon Brown. So a lot of my role is supporting country teams within the programme, in developing first of all, of course, an understanding how labour markets function within those countries, and to a certain extent, disfunction, and then shaping the interventions that we can try out in any particular context, and then evidence what works and what doesn't work, what needs to be further adapted or further tested or further innovated.

[Kimberly] So, what would you say the barriers are for people with disabilities in getting employment?

[Simon] At the beginning of the programme, we invested significant time in really understanding how the labour market functions in every country. This was called a labour market assessment. From that we got a real deep understanding of what barriers that are created for employers, but also what barriers are there for job seekers. The ability to access information of opportunity was a significant barrier.

Of course, the access to education, and being able to access the education that is linked to your career aspiration - but often what we find, and it's a barrier that particularly young people are seeing, is that they're channelled into education paths that are not consistent with what they really aspire to.

But, the third barrier, and I think it's a truly important barrier, is the [lack of] self-confidence and often, people with disability refer to this as self-stigma, which is a label that we tend to shy away from, but it's important to talk about. Where, from their families, from their communities, from their early education, from the society which surrounds them, they're told that formal employment is not the right career for them, and their aspiration should be more limited to more manual work. And that whole messaging is then internalised, and therefore creates a barrier to people realising what their real aspiration is as a livelihood.

So it's these areas that we have to focus on for persons with disability. But also reflect from an employer's side that they perceive and they see that young people in general, but also persons with disabilities, lack employability skills. Now, that's more than hard skills, that's more than the education system, it's those softer skills, those interpersonal skills, those job seeking skills, the ability to communicate effectively, to present themselves, to perform well in interviews, to write really powerful application letters and resumes. So, it's these kinds of

employability skills which are a key gap that also create a barrier for young people to be able to compete within the labour market system.

[Kimberly] Are there other barriers that stop businesses employing people with disabilities?

[Simon] A large percentage of the employers we talked to do want to be inclusive, and often have tried to attract applications from persons with disabilities. But, they all recognise in general that it hasn't worked, that persons with disabilities are not applying, or when they apply are not being able to successfully navigate that recruitment process. This whole thing then comes back to disability confidence, that employers are consistently saying, "We're not confident about this. We actually need help to be able to be more confident around disability."

And that's a terrific place for a programme to be in, because that then really shapes what we should be focusing on: the employability and the self-confidence of jobseekers and the disability confidence of employers.

[Kimberly] I wonder, those companies you're working with, why is disability inclusion important to them and their companies?

[Simon] I think the motivation doesn't change, and hasn't changed since the coronavirus. The motivation was there before. Now, what drives that motivation is not a single answer. Different companies have different motivations. Sometimes it's a country office of a multinational company, and the multinational company has made a commitment to disability, like Unilever, through the former chief executive, Paul Polman, and his commitment to the Valuable 500 campaign of a five percent representation of persons with disability in their workforces by 2025. That's one motivation that's almost from the centre to the country operating units.

The other extreme is a very passionate CEO that said that this is just the right thing to do, that my customer base should be reflected in my workforce. So, there's all kinds of motivations there, a broad spectrum of them.

[Kimberly] Is there also a business case for disability inclusion above and beyond personal passions or motivations or company commitments?

[Simon] In terms of employers, I've never come across any employer that said, "Show me a business case." I think there's... a number, like, "What's in it for me in terms of financing?" I think part of the motivation, and if I again go back to Paul Polman and Unilever, and I'm paraphrasing his words, but he talked of an \$8 trillion market that was being ignored. \$8 trillion globally of consumer spending that is controlled either by persons with disability, their families, or their friends.

That number is quite compelling and quite attractive. But, we tend to approach this much more from a business and ethical case, that recognising actually it's the right thing to do, that companies should be reflective of their customers and their consumer bases, but also the society that surrounds them, within which they operate.

[Kimberly] Obviously, the world's changed quite significantly with the COVID-19 pandemic. I wonder what impact that's going to have on the ability of job seekers with disabilities to gain employment?

[Simon] The impact on job seekers of course that are entering now a much more competitive market, where there are more people in search for employment and less employment opportunities, which makes it much more difficult, or even more difficult, for persons with disabilities to secure formal employment, particularly where they come from in terms of their self confidence, in terms of their work readiness or employment readiness.

[Kimberly] I wonder if you worry for the job seekers.

[Simon] Yes, of course I do worry about that, but it's also a motivation I think. What we need is to get to a position where job seekers that are passing through this programme, how do we invest as much effort as possible, even if we can't bring people together, to improve their chances of being able to compete equally for jobs? And recognising of course that employers, as they do begin to recruit, have then got a much bigger pool of people to recruit from, and there is a risk of course that job seekers with disabilities will be further disadvantaged because the pool is so big.

So, we have to invest that time, we have to make sure as much as is possible that those job seekers have the right technical skills but also the right soft skills in order to present themselves.

Now, COVID has caused us to think differently and I often say that crises are also moments of innovation. I think this is true in both cases. For employers, we have been able to use technology to deliver training, but also technology to deliver disability confidence resources and within that core set, or pool of companies that have expressed interest to work with us, we do regularly send out resources that continue to build that confidence through reading, but also through training delivery. And then in parallel, continuing to build resources that are relevant and CRPD compliant that further build the confidence of employers.

[Kimberly] I was just wondering about what you think will happen for job seekers with disabilities in the future, whether they're likely to be set back a bit in terms of being included in formal employment. It sounds like you're very positive about what can be done and what still can be achieved.

[Simon] Yeah. I tend to be quite positive most of the time, but there's also a realism. It's going to be at least a tough couple of years.

If we get it right, if we continue to focus on those three areas of the labour market system, the disability confidence of employers, the employment readiness and self-confidence of job seekers, and when we can have more activities, restarted that influence those rules of the system, then we get people in the best possible place. And that's got to be our focus. The labour market system has not gone away, it's not collapsed, it's in a shock. But it will recover and we just need to make sure that persons with disabilities are right at the front of the queue for employment and not at the back of the queue.

[Introductory male voice] If you'd like to hear more from our citizen reporters, why not visit www.inclusivefutures.org