

BUILDING ON DIVERSITY - RECOGNISING THE ABILITIES OF A DIVERSE WORKFORCE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Access Ability is a Dublin based DP with a mission to maximise employment opportunities for people with disabilities by addressing the structural, attitudinal and policy issues which currently prevent employers from recognising the abilities of individuals. It has created a total package of services that was launched to employers, at the end of last April.

AIMS AND BACKGROUND OF THE DP

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The [Access Ability Development Partnership](#) (DP) has been developed and is now led by Gandon Enterprises using its knowledge, experience and skills gained over a vast number of years of employing people with disabilities. Gandon Enterprises has an excellent track record in the management of diversity and one of its companies '[The Mill Gandon Logistics](#)' was rated by the Irish Independent newspaper (in association with FAS, the Irish Training Authority and the national 'Excellence through People' scheme) as being the fourth best company to work for in Ireland. It is also short-listed in the top 100 for the competition for "The Best Company to Work for in Europe".

INNOVATIVE APPROACH AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Access Ability enables an employer to take on a person with a disability without any attendant concerns or administrative inconveniences, as it provides the following Training and Consultancy Services:

- **Accessibility Services for Recruitment and Selection** designed to give human resources managers, line managers and anyone who is involved in the employment process a better understanding of the views and needs of people with disabilities;
- **Managing a Disability-Friendly Environment** designed to give organisations a comprehensive overview and insight into all of the issues that arise when employing a person with a disability;
- **Disability Awareness Training** designed to raise awareness of disability issues and to give people an understanding of the experience of disability;
- **Environmental Assessment** designed to assist employers to ensure that their buildings and their workplaces are accessible in every possible respect, recognising that barriers can be attitudinal as well as physical
- **Financial Incentives** designed to provide advice on government grants and schemes available to employers when they hire and retain employees with a disability and on how to access these sources of financial support
- **WorkPath** is a unique, [confidential and professional service](#) that is available on-site and on a continuing basis to deal with support issues and needs, as they arise

The innovative element of this approach lies in the combined delivery rather than in the type of services that are offered. In effect, Access Ability provides a real one-stop-shop and, if in the unlikely instance that a product, which an employer wants isn't 'on its shelves', the DP partners offer such a wide range of knowledge and expertise that a supply solution can quickly be found.

Another aspect of the DP's approach that is very important is its concentration on the business case, which is geared to demonstrating that it is possible for employers to take on people with disabilities without any losses in terms of productivity or profit. Access Ability intends to contact around 500 companies and to create at least 300 sustainable jobs and it is confident of success for two main reasons. Firstly, many of those associated with the development of its services have worked in the business world and this has ensured a high level of quality. Secondly, the Irish Government accepted the European Council Directives ([2000/43/EC](#) and [2000/78/EC](#)) related to anti-discrimination, and businesses will have to make "reasonable accommodations for workers with disabilities" unless they can prove that they amount to a "disproportionate burden." The legislation will be implemented, in Ireland, from December 2003 and the DP believes that its services will be of great assistance to employers in their efforts to comply with their new obligations. Employers' interest in these services was also demonstrated when the Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister), Mary Harney, launched Access Ability on 30 April at a conference hosted by the Aisling Foundation, in Dublin Castle.

The local partnership is continuing to grow and now includes all the main actors such as public and private Recruitment and Employment Services, Trade Union interests, the Dublin Chamber of Commerce and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. This last partner will be very important when it comes to the mainstreaming of disability awareness into the recognised training and accreditation of HRD staff and Access Ability has already initiated a discussion with business schools on how its results might be incorporated into their curricula. The majority of the other partners are not direct deliverers of services but have committed themselves to promote the DP's services to large companies and SMEs. The Employment Services, both private and public, are considering the mainstreaming of the outcomes of the project and Manpower, the international recruitment agency, is looking at the wider implications and applications of this Irish experience to its European operations.

TRANSNATIONAL COOPERATION

Access Ability also provides the secretariat for the [S.A.M.E](#) (Social Accountability, Multiplier for Equality) Transnational Partnership (TP). The other partners come from Portugal and the Netherlands and there is also an associated partner called [REMPLOY](#), in the UK. The main objective of the TP is the accreditation of the best practice in companies that are employing people with disabilities, an activity that is directly relevant to the Irish concerns.

INVOLVEMENT IN ETG1

Terry Fahy the Director of Access Ability sees this Transnational Partnership as being, "a huge learning resource". So she was particularly pleased to be invited to the [Initial Workshop](#) of the EQUAL European Thematic Group on Employability, in Birmingham, as she hoped that it would also increase the DP's learning experience. Her personal reasons for attending the workshop were "to gain insights into how other EU countries are tackling the diversity issue, to gain information that will be transferable to the Access Ability and to network and make contacts, which will be of mutual benefit as the EQUAL projects progress". She found "the Open Space Workshop Method in Birmingham both stimulating and innovative" and now hopes "to bring my expertise and knowledge in the field of HR and Disability and also my experience of running a business to the ETG1's Working Group on People with Disabilities".

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