

Inclusive hiring practices vis-a-vis Persons with Disabilities: A case study of Café Coffee Day

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Abstract – In the recent years the CSR activities of companies have grown rapidly, consequently hiring of Persons with Disabilities has become a topic witnessing more and more research. The past researches and studies in the area show contradicting results vis-à-vis attitude of employers towards hiring of PwDs. However, relatively fewer researches have enlightened the inclusive hiring intentions of businesses in retail industry particularly in Indian context. The current study addresses this knowledge gap by exploring how India's largest coffee chain, Café Coffee Day is practicing and promoting inclusive hiring. The findings reveal the challenges and potential benefits on the business of differently hiring practices. The study makes three important contributions to the CSR literature. It provides empirical evidence of the benefits and challenges of hiring of PwDs in retail industry by studying the case of India's largest coffee chain. It states the importance of diversified and inclusive hiring practices, it also accentuates the prospective competitive advantage that hiring of disabled employees create for businesses and customer responses towards the same.

Index Terms – Inclusive Hiring, Persons with Disabilities, Café Coffee Day

1. Introduction and Literature Review

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has evolved with time and is now a significant component of corporate decision making. There are several definitions of CSR. The most suitable definition of CSR in this context is the one given by the European Commission that is 'the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society'. On an academic level early notion of CSR started in 1960s. Carroll (1991) gave a multi-layered concept of CSR that consists of four interrelated aspects: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities. To analyse the dimensions of CSR Carroll proposed a pyramid. This pyramid starts with first set of responsibilities that is the economic responsibilities as the companies are established to make profit by providing goods and services to the public. This is the base of the pyramid upon which other three responsibilities rest. The second level is the legal responsibility of a company. Third level consists of the ethical responsibility. The top most level is the philanthropic responsibility.

Recently we have witnessed an upward movement in the charts of organizational CSR drives, generating more employment opportunities for the persons with disabilities (PwDs). However, the reality seems to be different from the painted picture, particularly in Indian scenario, owing to the government's regulations and laws, corporates are ostensibly portraying themselves as inclusive hiring organizations. As per the data of Washington times (2005), globally in developing countries, 80% to 90% of persons with disabilities of working age are unemployed, whereas, for industrialized countries the figure comes down to 50% to 70%. According to Indian census 2001, 21.9 million people or 2.13% of the country's population are persons with disabilities (The Economic Times, 2005). Out of this percentage 74% persons with physical disability and 94% mentally disabled persons are unemployed (Regional Report of Asia, 2005)

The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act in India, 1995 mandates a 3% quota (which was later increased to 4%) for differently-abled in all government jobs, for positions that are both directly selected, or through promotion. Three sections of the PwD Act or Persons with Disabilities Act address the issue of employment of the PwD. These regulations and acts were introduced in order to ensure that the disabled people develop a more secure sense of self and social belonging. However, a Report from Economic Times in 2015 stated that Public Sector Companies (PSUs) were falling short of this 3% reservation in their work force

Apart from a disheartening picture from the majority of Indian companies, few service sector companies are taking initiatives towards inclusive employment. The companies like Lemon Tree Hotels, Capgemini, Costa Coffee, Café Coffee Day, Tata Group of Industries, Accenture India, Landmark Group etc., have been making efforts towards making their employee roles more inclusive by hiring and retaining people with disabilities (India Times, 2018)

Stevens (2002) reported that when asked about the challenges or obstacles faced by the large to medium sized companies, concerning hiring of persons with disabilities, the companies considered them as good as anyone else, as long as they have the required skills for the job. Whereas, when asked from a smaller firm, they exhibited reluctance as they considered the company to be too small to risk taking on board anyone who is disabled. This attitude imply that disabled people are considered to be risk and liability for the organization rather than effective team members.

There are a number of researches that also highlight the customer's responses towards the businesses that hire persons with disabilities. The researches also state the responses of customers when they come across a frontline disabled employee. Until now, the only positive response has been witnessed in the hospitality domain, where the benefits of hiring frontline disabled employees have been highlighted. Gröschl (2013) found out that there are hotel customers who purposefully seek out properties with disabled employees working with them.

Similarly, as per a study conducted in Marriott (Houtenville and Kalargyrou, 2012) it was found that, disabled customers staying at the hotel appreciated the opportunity to interact with disabled employees. It created a positive image of the hotel for them as commonalities (disability in this case) play an important role in building relationships. Thus, it was evident from the conducted researches that customers' service quality judgment is affected by his attitude towards the hiring of disabled employees, which consequently benefits the image of the businesses as a whole.

As per the social servicescape model the employees represent environmental stimuli to which the customers respond. They influence customers' decision to approach or avoid a product/service and also play an important role in service convenience (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). Similarly, the study by Kim and Kim (2012) professes that retail shoppers have a cognitive, emotional and also behavioural response towards a sales associate's physical attributes i.e. his dress, physical attractiveness, age gender etc. And in the same study the effect of non-verbal cues, such as smiles, politeness etc. were also picked up.

2. Objective of the study

The objective of this case study is to understand the role of big retail organizations in hiring of persons with disabilities, the study also throws light on the challenges faced by these organizations in the course of hiring and training programs for PwDs. This study accentuates the experiences and attitude of employers, trainers as well as the co-workers vis-à-vis working with persons with disabilities. The study also throws light on the attitude and views of customers in retail industry when they come across a front desk differently abled employee. It is attempted to understand the changing face of hiring in the neoliberal era, and to promote the hiring of disabled employees by presenting a motivational case of organisation involved in the same.

3. Methodology

Research methodology can be described as the science of studying how research is to be carried out. It is the step by step procedure that is designed and followed for the purpose of doing research work.

3.1 Research Design

This study is an intent to examine the recent trend of hiring young lower to middle-class deaf and mute workers in Indian cafés by taking the case of Café Coffee Day. This research work follows a descriptive research design, of a conclusive nature and is based on a single case study. The case of India's biggest coffee chain i.e. Café Coffee Day is taken up for the study. The population for the study are the employees working with CCD and the customers who visit the café. The sample frame consists of the Human Resource (HR) managers due to their involvement in the whole hiring process, the Learning and Development (L&D) managers because they train and provide the required skills to the workers and are directly in

contact with them, the co-workers of the disabled employees as they are a part of the work environment and the peer group, they share the day to day task and activities with the differently abled workers hired by CCD and the regular customers of the cafés in the Delhi NCR region to know their views.

The major reason behind selecting CCD as the case for this study is its geographical expansion all over India, with over 1500 cafeterias it also has become India's largest coffee chain. CCD not just has outlets in major metro cities but also in smaller districts, therefore this study can provide more ethnographically appropriate results.

3.2 Data Collection Approach

The data for the study is collected by means of both primary and secondary sources. The primary data collected for the study is qualitative and is gathered by means of personal interviews and telephonic interviews. The interviews of the HR and L&D managers were conducted preponderantly in the corporate office of CCD based in Okhla, New Delhi. Whereas the interviews of the disabled employees and their co-workers were administered in various CCD outlets based in the region of Delhi N2CR. Telephonic interviews were conducted to get responses of the employees based in other regions that are, Lucknow, Mathura, Agra. Secondary data was collected from the websites, reports, articles and other documents.

4. The case of Café Coffee Day

In 2018 India Times enlisted 11 Indian Businesses That Hire Differently-Abled people, among these 11 companies is the name of India's largest coffee chain; Café Coffee Day. Café Coffee Day, owned by the holding company Coffee Day Enterprises Ltd, is already the market leader when it comes to coffee in India. It has more than 1,500 cafes in 200 cities and towns across the country, including 191 in Bangalore and 185 in Delhi. It is also the largest producer of Arabica beans in Asia exporting to various countries including USA, Europe and Japan. Café Coffee Day was started as a retail restaurant in 1996. The first CCD outlet was set up on July 11, 1996, at Brigade Road, Bengaluru, Karnataka. It rapidly expanded across various cities in India adding more stores. In 2007 Café Coffee Day won the Times Food Award under the category of "Best Coffee Bar" from Times of India. In 2012 Café Coffee Day was ranked as 26th Most Trusted Service Brand in India and as 2nd Most Exciting Brand under the category of "Food Services" in India under a survey done by Brand Equity (Economic Times).

4.1 Inclusive Hiring Policies

CCD has been hiring candidates with disability and creating a special induction program for the speech and hearing impaired. CCDs hiring policy includes employing the differently-abled people and providing them with the required training and development programs for their career advancement. Coffee Day Global has tied up with NGOs like 'Enable India' to work out avenues to employ more number of disabled employees. Apart from providing employment to Deaf and Dumb individuals or D&Ds as they call it CCD also has provision of vocational training for them. In 2013, CCD received the 'Shell Helen Keller Award' in the Role Model Companies category. The award by the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP) recognised CCD's contribution towards the improvement of lives of persons with disabilities by encouraging change in recruitment attitude. These programs and efforts on the part of Coffee Day Enterprises Ltd. make it a strong case for a study like this.

4.2 The Silent Brew masters

According to CCDs human resource executive, CCD was originally approached by an NGO for hiring disabled workers for its headquarters. The organization did not rush into the decision to present token efforts, instead the corporation's HR executives thought critically about their needs and how disabled workers can be accommodated in to the day to day task of the company. They realised that due to the low-skill set the potential applicants possessed, the jobs in the headquarters weren't feasible for them and therefore they should rather be placed in the coffee outlets where they can work based on the training provided as per the job requirement. Another issue was to make sure the disability of the worker doesn't make him feel less capable for the job, which is why hiring a physically disabled workers wasn't a viable option. In addition, hiring blind workers did not make sense either, as they would face difficulty in navigating cafés crowded with people table and chairs. As such, deaf workers, to be trained as brewmasters, made the most sense. Consequently, the 'silent brewmasters' program came into being.

The hearing and speech impaired employees hired by CCD are given the tag of “Silent Brewmasters” who brew coffee behind the counter. Since they possess a heightened sense of smell and vision, they ensure their coffees are served with perfection. This program is designed to aid the use of their strong sense of smell, vision and taste effectively. CCD has recruited and trained over 150 people with disabilities to date. Their Silent Brewmasters are a testament to CCD’s continuous dedication for the cause.

4.3 Silent Brewmasters and their managers

Drawing from the ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted in the CCD outlets of Delhi NCR region it can be argued that the representation of speech and hearing impaired employees have been as of immobile workers who add value due to their immobility. They add diversity in the workforce of the organization and they make the workplaces seem more caring and noble. The Human Resource managers had a favourable opinion towards hiring of disabled employees and considered it a ‘diversity issue’ they added that it gives a good social parameter to the business.

According to the frontline store managers hearing and speech impaired employees did not involve in chit-chats or spend their time idling during work hours and were more dedicated comparatively. They are fully invested in the task at hand – if it is making cappuccino they make the best cappuccino and they work fast. The managers said that they in fact are differently abled and are quick learners, they tend to be prompt and more work oriented.

One of the managers at CCD said “Silent brewmasters have a heightened sense of smell and vision which ensure the most appealing taste and visual presentation of coffees. They value the position they have been given and do not take things for granted. We are very happy to see the enthusiasm with which they contribute to bringing satisfaction to our customers.”

In an interview, the president of marketing at Café Coffee Day said that they do CSR from the heart. At CCD corporate responsibilities have three broad spokes i.e. employability, education and hunger, and CCD is doing relevant work in all these aspects. He also stated that the team is proud of the ‘silent brewmasters’, despite of being differently abled employees they have a strong sense of smell that enhances their work as coffee brewers and make them fantastic brewmasters and CCD has identified that strength.

CCD has a vocational training college in Chikmagalur where the youth from tough circumstances are trained and are provided with free training, accommodation and food to make them employable in the hospitality industry. This initiative made the management aware of the fact that they are adding values to the lives of the underprivileged people. And therefore more focused efforts were made for the disabled individuals as well to benefit them from the Coffee Day’s CSR programs.

The managers agree to the fact that the hearing and speech impaired employees are quick learners and their sense of loyalty to the brand and the customers is incredible. One of the regional managers at CCD stated that he was particularly impressed by disabled workers’ ability of understanding and adapting to the requirements of the regular customers. “There are instances where the silent brewmaster (speech and hearing impaired) would prepare coffee exactly the way a customer would want it to be, the moment they see them in the café. Some customers are impressed by such a personalised service.”

Apart from all the good notion that prevails about having on board a disabled employee, sometimes the managers face challenges too. As per one of the managers based in a café in Lucknow, not everybody is trained to the sign language which causes communication gap among the hearing and deaf employees. This communication lapse also comes in picture when a customer has to interact with a disabled employee, besides the efforts from both the delivering and the receiving end of such communication both the customer as well as the employee are left with confusion and self doubts. This becomes demotivating for the hearing and speech impaired employee and also puts the customers in fluster.

There is increased responsibility on the part of managers having a team that includes a disabled individual, but the managers firmly believe that even though they have to put in extra efforts from their side, yet the silent brewmasters make it all worth. It gives a feeling of noble work, and a sense of satisfaction when they see their underprivileged subordinates doing good and getting great responses by the customers.

“There is this guy I have seen working in one of the CCDs in Lucknow, and I believe apart from listening and hearing he can do every task possible in the best way you can imagine. He has magical energy and enthusiasm that lightens up the environment, he is bright as any of us, and he does not let his disability pull him down” says a Lucknow based HR manager at CCD. Persons with Disability bring in diversity in the workplace and also makes the business look good.

With increasing attrition, employing workers with disabilities is becoming a new source of value for corporations. Workers with disabilities are believed to be immobile and therefore are retained longer and also they put forth a positive image of the organization. But it comes with added responsibility for the managers, they have to ensure equal development and promotion opportunities for all the employees. Also they have to look after special and appropriate orientation programs to be organized for the deaf employees, they should get proper on job training and shouldn't lack behind from other employees due to their disability.

4.4 Experiences of the silent brewmasters

The hearing and speech impaired workers at CCD believe that communication is not a problem, these workers like their job. As per a worker, initially she was afraid of her disability being a drawback in a "hearing-speaking corporate world", especially in a place like a coffee shop, where success is majorly based on communication and customer relationship. But, she feels its not making her lag behind anymore, "Our other senses are tuned to what the customer wants and we anticipate those needs -be it somebody wanting a glass water or a menu or like their brew a particular way, we anticipate it and be ready" For her communication is all about being sensitive and observant.

Every 'silent brewmaster' of CCD had a different story to share, most of them consisted of how they aimed to be at some place else career-wise when they started, but structural forces resulted in their placement at CCD. They added that they were satisfied working at the café, the job provides them with self actualization and gives them a feeling of being an equal part of the society. The training that they are provided with adds to their knowledge base and enhances their level of communication with the hearing people.

The disabled employees at CCD were glad to be treated with respect and equality while working there. They had good relationship with their hearing co-workers and enjoyed their work. Most of the workers were placed in CCD with the help of NGOs working towards employment of persons with disabilities. One of the deaf workers in the café said that she enjoyed working in the café, she not only brews coffee but also sometimes bring them to the customers and operated the cash register. She was a known face for the regular customers of the café and they often requested her coffee and commented that she made the best coffee that they had ever had, this has helped in boosting her enthusiasm that was lost for a long time.

But the views of the deaf and mute workers in these cafes have been ambivalent, because these jobs are viewed as temporary and not life long. The opportunities for promotion is very less, there were lesser chances for advancement within the corporations because very few disabled workers had the written and oral skills required to be the managers. The employees also find less scope of social and financial development in this profile of job. The competition is very high and most of the hearing and abled workers leave soon for better jobs which leaves the underprivileged in distress at times. Apart from this, usually hiring of a silent brewmaster is limited to 1 worker per café, therefore it forecloses the possibility of camaraderie with co-workers.

One of the big concerns of the disabled workers was the age cut off in CCD hiring policy, they are extremely skeptical about what the future holds for them. While the hearing workers use their experience to discover newer avenues or expect promotion within the organization, the deaf workers are restrained from the same due to the structural and educational barriers.

As far as the relationship with the customers is concerned, the silent brewmasters claim that they come across more of 'happy customer' faces rather than arrogant and insensitive ones. They have comparatively lesser grievances about issues with customers. They say that the customers, once they realise they are interacting with a hearing impaired employee, they mellow down and their body language changes, they are politer and tend to behave with respect and amicability.

4.5 Attitude of customers towards the 'silent brewmasters'

Customers interaction is more with the employees of a company involved in hospitality and retail. When asked from the customers how they find interacting with the silent brewmasters, they said they very much appreciated them, they appeared to be more committed than the other workers. To some customers visiting a café with a disabled employee seemed like a noble deed too, they said they felt they were doing more than just having coffee, it gave an experience of social contribution. The customers admire the initiative of the organization for employing persons with disability.

When asked from a dining customer about their views regarding coming across a hearing and speech impaired employee, she said “it always gives a positive image of the place they are working in, its good to see the corporate world taking steps towards issues like unemployment of the disabled people.”

A group of college students said that they don’t get many opportunities to be a part of social activities; coming across a disabled employee, encouraging them and admiring them for their work or even getting involved in a conversation with them gives a feeling of satisfaction. The customers also said that after coming across a disabled employee and interacting with them, they felt an urge to contribute towards benefaction of PwDs.

Though the customer responses were majorly lined on the positive side, yet the customers expressed a sense of hesitation when interacting with a PwD. One of the customers of the café said that he often was concerned whether or not he will be able to elucidate his words to the deaf worker in sign language. He added that most of the customers, in fact majority of them aren’t trained in sign language and thus they are unsure of how they will communicate with a worker who cannot speak or hear. The customers do not want to put the disabled workers in an uncomfortable situation and therefore rather preferred to talk with a hearing employee. Some customers admitted that despite of admiring the work of disabled employees, they often waited for the hearing employee to take charge of the cash counter to place their orders, to avoid being marked as a gauche.

Almost all the customers interviewed has positive outlook for a company hiring disabled individuals, the customers respected the workers and said that these workers are somehow motivating and inspiring them too. Such interactions not only bring up one of the major issues prevailing in the society of unemployment of PwDs, but also puts a person in self assessment of their contribution towards it.

Discussions

This study analysed how “silent brewmasters” of CCD and other disabled employees, are underrepresented and are considered as immobile workers. However, they add value to the corporations that employ them and create a competitive advantage for the business yet to some extent it is noted that hiring of a disabled employee is more of a ‘benefitting the corporate image’ activity rather than a social activity. They bring novelty in the experiences of the workplaces, and also improve the brand image, making corporations look more concerned of social welfare.

The admiration that the corporations receive from the customers’ end is impelling them to hire the disabled employees. Though the management agrees that the disabled employees particularly the ‘silent brewmasters’ in this case are quick learners and are more devoted to work but the latters weak educational background limits the the level of job they are being offered. Though there have been efforts from the part of various corporations towards providing employment to disabled employees but there also is a requirement of providing them with strong educational background to support their career advancement.

It’s the job of the management of the company supporting diverse employment, to make sure that disability is not treated as a special issue or set of issues, rather, it should be incorporated well into overall workforce diversity management plans. The disabled employees should not feel alienated in their workplace. Corporations now are not considering hiring of PwDs as charity any more but rather like a business decision; employment of disabled workers create affective economies where non-disabled workers and the customers of the business feel inspired, invested and ultimately committed. Disability is becoming a non-threatening diversity through which differences are celebrated and considered inspirational. From customer responses to managerial experiences, the thought-process around hiring of disabled employees is changing rapidly. The ‘silent brewmasters’ coming out as the favourite coffee makers for the customers and ideal employees for the organization are exemplifying this change in the overall scenario of disability and employment. Though there still aren’t ‘real’ opportunities for the disabled people yet, a step forward is the silver lining for them.

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