

# Equal opportunity policy must for cos

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Mumbai: India Inc has been nudged to be more inclusive when it comes to hiring and retaining the differently-abled as 'The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017' — which came into effect last month — also casts certain obligations on private sector employers. So far, for creating an inclusive society, the government had concentrated on its organisations and PSUs, but this approach has changed.

From June 15, all employer organisations need to adopt an 'Equal Opportunity Policy' (EOP) containing details of amenities that will be provided to their differently-abled employees. The policy is to be displayed on the employer's website or at conspicuous places in the work premises. A copy is also to be registered with the relevant authorities. There are many additional requirements — organisations having more than 20 employees need to appoint a liaison officer to oversee recruitment and provision of facilities for the differently-abled. Employers need to ensure that there is no discrimination and provide necessary training and infrastructure facilities to enable their differently-abled to function effectively.

"These developments have taken the private sector by surprise, even as several MNCs have had an EOP, which was also extended to employees in India. Employers will need to revamp hiring practices and modify their HR policies. This step taken by the government will ensure that our employment standards are in line with international norms," says Vikram Shroff, head (HR law practice), Nishith Desai Associates.

While no employment reservation quota has been fixed, the disability law calls upon the government and local authorities to provide incentives to private sector employers to ensure that at least 5% of their workforce comprises differently-abled. "It's unclear whether the private sector that receives any kind of incentives from the government will have to meet this employment target," adds Shroff.

A few companies in India, including non-MNCs, are equal opportunity employers — others may now be prompted to follow suit. Anwar, a hockey player and Paralympic athletics champion, once had to sell his medals to sustain himself and family. Now he is gainfully employed with Mahindra Holidays & Resorts as a senior service facilitator in the purchase department. Nearly 60 differently-abled employees are working across resorts as front-office operators, spa therapists, electricians and plumbers, gardeners, kitchen staff and housekeeping staff, to name a few instances.

Pratik Roy, chief human resource officer, Mahindra Holidays, says, "We have a structured hiring policy. Through a special recruitment programme, we reach out to organisations that work for empowerment of the differently-abled. Specially attuned training programmes are run for such employees to enable them to develop resort hospitality skill sets."

Lemon Tree Hotels has always been an equal opportunity employer. Currently, it has more than 500 differently-abled employees (13% of its total workforce) employed across functions. Explains Rajesh Kumar, VP (HR), "Such a commitment requires substantial investments in training and refresher modules, as the differently-abled are vulnerable to being left behind over time. The training formats are customised to meet their needs. For instance, video-based training modules for employees in housekeeping, food & beverage sections have been enhanced with the use of Indian sign language."

At Deutsche Bank, diversity and inclusivity (which also covers the differently-abled) is an important agenda for the board. A robust onboarding process ensures that special infrastructure needs of the differently-abled are addressed right upfront — be it provision of screen-reading software for the visually challenged or one-handed key boards for those facing upper limb disability. An employee-driven network 'dbEnable' connects the 100-plus differently-abled employees, ensures engagement and enables policy or procedural enhancement to meet their needs. Customised career development sessions, mentoring programmes and grievance redressal mechanisms are in place.

Sensitisation of team members is crucial for creating a conducive working. Madhavi Lall, head (HR) at Deutsche Bank, India,

says, "Basic sign language training is provided to employees so that they can communicate more effectively with those having hearing disabilities. Special sensitisation sessions are also held for managers having differently abled team members to enable them to better understand their requirements and career aspirations."

Shroff points out some misses in the regulations. "For instance, no transition period or timeline for ensuring compliance has been provided. Similarly, even as the EOP needs to include various details such as special leave, the law does not specify the quantum of such leave or the purpose for which it can be availed."