

Disability in the workplace is not only physical
by Dr Jerry Gule, SAE4D Chairman

In the Integrated National Disability Strategy – White Paper (1997) a profound statement is made: “Among the yardsticks by which to measure a society's respect for human rights, to evaluate the level of its maturity and its generosity of spirit, is by looking at the status that it accords to those members of society who are most vulnerable, disabled people, the senior citizens and its children”.

This provides a good basis for assessing progress that society at large and employers in particular have made in addressing issues of disability.

There is legislation, regulations, technical guides, written academic papers, business case presentations and innumerable speeches made all which emphasize the integration of people with disabilities in society and in economic activities.

The Employment Equity Act and now the Revised Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) legislation prioritise the employment of people with disabilities.

Suffice to say that it is not only physical disabilities that are being referred to. In the society as in the workplace, there are thousands of people with disabilities that are not immediately apparent.

Exclusion of these people from active social participation as well as from employment or the failure to cater for people with so-called “invisible” disabilities or their failure to disclose their conditions, can only make it more difficult for companies not being compliant with the requirements of the Revised BBBEE Codes of Good Practice, now in effect since 1 May 2015.

The revised Codes, like the Employment Equity Act, stipulate that Black people (African, Coloured and Indian) with disabilities must constitute at least two percent of a business's workforce.

People with less visible disabilities such as epilepsy or bipolar disorder often face an additional burden of discrimination because of ignorance, and even fear, about these conditions.

Fear makes smart people act irrationally, stupidly and with prejudice towards their fellow human beings. And through fear, one may not take chances that are available to him or her.

As a result, many people with “invisible” disorders are often reluctant to disclose their condition for fear of not getting the job or being discriminated against.

However, the fear that people with disabilities have is not always misplaced.

I recently received an email from a person with professional qualifications and degrees who has been unemployed for 23 years. The reason, he believes, is because he has epilepsy. Although his condition is well controlled with medication, he is obliged to disclose it because most jobs for which he is qualified would require him to drive a car, which his condition prevents him from doing.

His inability to drive would not impair his ability to do the job for which he would have been employed. It would have been relatively easy for employers to accommodate this minor inconvenience.

But it is the fear of epilepsy – a condition characterised by seizures – and a lack of understanding of what it entails, that probably cost this man – and many like him – his career.

[Epilepsy South Africa](#) points out that “reasonable accommodation for an employee with epilepsy usually involves simple arrangements which help to ensure safety in the workplace and maximise the highest potential of the employee.”

One of the first steps towards the greater disclosure of “invisible” disabilities must be a change in attitude among employers.

Employers – and here I refer to hiring managers, top management and HR professionals – need to educate themselves to understand all the implications around employing people with all kinds of disabilities. They also need to educate their employees to avoid strained and potentially discriminatory behaviour within the workplace itself once that person has been employed. The goal, ultimately, is to ensure the full integration of people with disabilities in the workplace.

What is the SAE4D?

The SAE4D is a non-profit employers' organisation that was set up to promote the recruitment, retention and development of people with disabilities in the workplace. The organisation seeks to show and encourage member companies through successful case studies how they can not only meet the 2% target but exceed it in the long-term and do so profitably.

The business case for employing people with disabilities is solid, if in doubt just read profiles of some of global best companies to work for. SAE4D members are able to share experiences, develop best practices, and develop ways of effectively confronting and tackling prejudices that act as barriers to the integration of people with disabilities in the workplace.

To accelerate its members' education and training, the SAE4D holds focused workshops which provide a platform for cutting edge information, robust discussions in a safe environment and a sharing of knowledge and solving problems facing member organisations.

The next SAE4D breakfast workshop, which takes place on Tuesday, May 26, 2015 from 7:30 AM – 10:00 AM at ABB, a member company, in Longmeadow Business Park, Modderfontein, Johannesburg, will examine and offer practical information on the subject of Reasonable Accommodation and its implications for employers.

For more information about these free workshops as well as the SAE4D, contact Tshepo Richard Rankowe, Project Coordinator on 071 1578428 or email: tshepo@sae4d.co.za

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About SAE4D

South African Employers for Disability (SAE4D) is a body constituted by employers who are committed to addressing issues confronting the integration of people with disabilities in the workplace. The organisation was set up to share experience, develop best practices, confront and tackle prejudices that act as barriers to the integration of people with disabilities in the workplace, and form a common understanding of the challenges and solutions required to fully develop the potential of people with disabilities to contribute meaningfully to society and business.

SAE4D members are South African companies who are signatories to the Constitution of the SAE4D, its principles and values.

Current SAE4D members include: ABB; Absa; Anglo American; Barloworld; Bowman Gilfillan; Edcon; Ernst & Young; Eskom; GlenrandMIB; KPMG; Lorimar; Nedbank; PPC; SAB and Total.

For more information, please view the [SAE4D video](#), visit the [SAE4D Facebook page](#); or go to the SAE4D website at www.sae4d.co.za

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