

**GLOBAL BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC ROUNDTABLE
ON ADDICTION AND MENTAL HEALTH**

*The Roundtable is affiliated with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Resident at GPC International*

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“SO DO I”

DISABILITY, EMPLOYMENT AND ME

Notes For Remarks

By

Bill Wilkerson

Roundtable Co-Founder and CEO

To

The Annual General Meeting

Of

Future Abilities And Creative Employment”
(FACE)

Newmarket, Ontario

October 10, 2001

World Mental Health Day in Canada

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I am very pleased to be here this evening. Washington to Newmarket in 24 hours. The Roundtable keeps me busy.

It is an honor to be asked to address your annual meeting.

Disability can be a trigger word in today's society. It may suggest lack of capacity. Which is not factual. It may say damaged goods. Which is inaccurate.

The word is written into law, scripted into work and health protocols and programs. All driven by good intentions.

Most significantly, perhaps, it is sculpted – for better and ill – into public attitudes conveying certain imagery, and interpretation. It is in these details where society has a devil of a time understanding who persons with disabilities are, what we can do, what we offer, what we legitimately need.

Except for my Irish temperament, and a thousand other things, I am allegedly not disabled. Nonetheless, I say “we” because the subject is about all of us.

In preparing for tonight's remarks, I started thinking about what persons with so-called disabilities have in common with me – being, as I say, a person—so called – of sound mind and body.

In doing that, I found that the list that binds us is a long one. I will get to that in a moment.

First, though, permit me to make a few general comments on the economic and work aspects of promoting not discounting the ability of people – the ability of people in all walks of life.

The ability to participate. The ability to earn a living. The ability to contribute. The ability to grow. The ability to enjoy and return the love of our families and our friends.

Over the past several weeks, I have been working with the Ministry of Citizenship on an article for their website – MCZP Paths To Equal Opportunity. The article makes the “business case for accessibility.”

A business case is not wrapped in hearts and flowers. It is fairly hard-nosed, practical and, I hope, informative. That's what a business should do.

The process has been – for me – a learning experience of some proportion.

For one thing, I have learned that the Ministry officials specializing in this area including a very special personality you may know, by Ellen Passmore, are very dedicated to their work and effective in doing it. The subject – accessibility – merits our attention.

Secondly, this assignment taught me that accessibility must be a two-way street. Access for persons with disability to competitively-paid jobs. And access for business to this untapped pool of talent and what it represents in sheer consumer buying power.

Third, I learned that accessibility is not an expensive proposition for employers. It is a bargain. It is an investment, not a cost.

Persons with disabilities do good and productive work, efficiently and effectively.

What all of us in business must learn, therefore – and I hope this business case helps – is several things:

- At a time of when employers face a severe shortage of skills and labor, persons with disabilities represent a powerful mainstream of accessible, productive, trainable, reliable, available and willing talent.
- Persons with disabilities have considerable economic power in their own right – as consumers – and we need to recognize and quantify this.
- Through their own purchases and through the purchases of family and friends they influence in this GTA region, in this province and across this country – persons with disabilities spend billions of dollars on a for full range of products and services.

Can any company, today, afford to “write-off” – simply because we don't know any better – maybe 20 per cent of its total potential customer base. Because that's what we are likely talking about.

This fact resides at the heart of turning the tables on business in this whole question of accessibility. Their access to persons with disabilities would be in the whole truth of where we are.

Not just the access to competitively-paying jobs for persons with disabilities.

There is economic value in persons with disabilities. Access for business has a pay-off.

You have clout. Let's find a way to use it.

Employers not only serve the community's interests by knowing how and where to ensure persons with disabilities have access to competitively-paid jobs, they serve their own legitimate self-interest.

What is it, then, that we in business must do to open our eyes to – and capitalize on – this rather spectacular opportunity both in the labor markets, and in the consumer market place.

For one thing, we might start by doing what I did on the plane home from Washington last night -- by “listing the ways” in which we are different only as we should be – as individuals within the whole truth of who we are.

Let's take stock.

- When persons with disabilities do work, you also need a job you like. So do I.
- When you work, you need to feel a sense of accomplishment. So do I.
- Sometimes, persons with disabilities need an incline not a staircase to enter a building – so do I – since I use those inclines myself,. Wherever I find them.
- Thanks for your influence.
- Persons with disabilities may need convenience and ease of access to banking machines. Believe me, so do I.
- Persons with disabilities need competitive wages. All my life, so have I.
- Persons with disabilities sometimes need time off for personal reasons. So do we all.
- Persons with disabilities occasionally need mentoring on the job. So does everyone else.
- Persons with disabilities may need a modified workstation, training and time to adapt. In this age of ergonomics and teamwork, so does the whole world.
- Persons with disabilities sometimes need flexible hours. So do I.
- Persons with disabilities sometimes need an off-day and a day off. So do I.
- Persons with disabilities need tools to do their work. So do I. I can't access or open e-mail.
- Persons with disabilities need work as a source of who we are. So do I.

- Persons with disabilities need to have jobs they grow into not just jobs to survive in. Who doesn't?
- Persons with disabilities most likely know how to manage stress most effectively, knowing who they are. I wish we all did.
- Persons with disabilities, the record shows, show up for work on time consistently. Money is the bank for employers.
- Persons with disabilities need to have their performance on the job measured fairly and accurately. As we all do.
- Persons with disabilities may see better with their hearts than with their eyes. Their vision, nonetheless can have value-added for employers in dealing with customers' inquiries and complaints.
- Persons with disabilities may hear through what they see and feel through the sense of touch. This is a skill to promote in an era where information technology is the visual transaction vehicle of choice.
- Persons with disabilities need to be included – even in the rumour mill. So do I.
- Persons with disabilities seek fairness not favour in getting and keeping a job. So do I.
- Persons with disabilities want fulfillment in their work. So do I.
- Persons with disabilities solve problems. Life has taught them this. This is a skill which has dollar value in the workplace.
- Persons with disabilities earn and spend money. This is what our economy calls for. Jobs fuel both.
- Persons with disabilities don't walk around in packs. They are individuals who influence the buying decisions of friends and family. Business – listen up.
- Persons with disabilities are not special cases. They are demographics. Business – listen up. There is commercial value in this.
- Persons with disabilities have pride – especially when that flower is allowed to bloom in the fertile soil of productive work.
- Each of us – not some of us – needs a root in that soil.

- Persons with disabilities need honest feedback about their chances to compete for the job they've applied for and not silence from self-conscious hiring managers.
- When they land a job but don't do it, their performance should be assessed fairly.
- Persons with disability don't need sympathies, they need empathy and opportunity.
- Persons with disabilities need respect as individuals not accommodation as "a group."
- Workplace accommodation gives the employers access a rich vein of untapped talent in persons with disabilities. Let us understand this.

As I think this through, there is not much difference between us. We are people who want to work, people who have aptitudes, people who offer skills and need a job.

Let these canons be known to employers.

Disabled or not – and whatever that distinction is supposed to mean – we sail together in this world on one ship.

The ship is who we are – each of us.

We sail on one sea – the sea is life.

We sail toward one horizon – a horizon defined by our desire to live life as best we can.

On this ship, sailing this sea, we all have a job to do, a skill to offer, a place to be, a role to play. The wind will truly be at our sails where each of us can see or sense each other – at the crest of each wave – in the skin of our brother and sister.

Persons with disabilities need, simply, to be welcomed and treated as able people – because that's what they are – how clear the message comes. Because so do I.