

Public service achieves the 3% jobs target for people with disabilities for the first time

For over 35 years it has been Government policy that at least 3% of those employed in the public service should be people with disabilities. The Disability Act 2005 put this employment target on a statutory basis.

The 3% target is a positive action measure to ensure that people with disabilities can get jobs, or stay in their jobs, in the public sector. This is against a backdrop where, even during the economic boom, people with disabilities were twice as likely to be out of work as the general population.

Under the Disability Act public sector bodies are legally obliged to

- promote and support the employment of people with disabilities
- employ 3% of staff with disabilities, unless there are good reasons why not

The National Disability Authority has the role to report every year on how the public sector is doing on this front. In its latest report (for 2011) issued at the end of last year, it reported that for the first time ever this 3% target had been achieved.

This marks an important milestone. This achievement is all the more welcome against the backdrop of a public service which is downsizing and where most public bodies face an embargo on recruitment.

The total number of staff working in the public service has been decreasing since 2007 with a fall of more than 33,000 since its peak. However, there has been an increase in the reported number of people with disabilities working in the public service from 5,879 in 2007 to 6,171 in 2011. The 2011 figure represented a reported increase of 423 employees with disabilities as compared with 2010.

How has the 3% target been achieved?

This is the culmination of efforts by the public service to recruit, support and retain staff with disabilities. The Disability Liaison Officers (in the civil service), Access Officers and Equality Officers play an important role in supporting staff with disabilities, and ensuring they are accommodated to do their jobs.

There may be little that can be achieved, in most public sector organisations, to provide new openings for people with disabilities until the situation changes and the embargo is lifted; but other options can and are being tried, like work placements, including the Willing Able and Mentoring scheme run for graduates with disabilities by AHEAD.

Supporting staff who acquire a disability to stay in work, and creating a disability-friendly working environment are very important, particularly during the embargo when other options are limited. These actions create benefits for staff and customers of public bodies, as they deal with an increasingly diverse and ageing population.

Getting better at counting

In a relatively short period of time, it has become the norm for the public sector to do either an annual count of people with disabilities, or to have a system in place to track changes in the numbers of people with disabilities employed. It is important for all staff, whether or not they have a disability, to ensure they are included in any count, so that the figures are as accurate as possible, and organisations can provide supports as appropriate.

The number of people who are 'counted in', and the numbers who feel comfortable disclosing, confidentially, that they have a disability have been growing. The information collected is only used to provide anonymous statistics on the number of people with disabilities working in the public service.

Looking to the future

For many public bodies, supporting staff with disabilities is part of their wider commitment to support citizens with disabilities and to promote equality and diversity. Employing people with disabilities increases awareness among staff and management generally.

In these times when finding employment is much harder for everyone, it is encouraging to see the progress in reaching the 3% target being met. Hopefully these gains will be sustained into the future. The National Disability Authority will continue to work with public bodies to build on the improvements made and to offer support and advice on how to achieve compliance during 2013.

Many people with disabilities, recruited when the 3% target was first introduced in 1977, are now coming up to retirement. It is very important that public bodies plan ahead and build in the 3% obligation into future workforce planning to ensure the target is not only reached but is maintained.

The National Disability Authority's **2011 Report on Compliance with Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 on Employment of People with Disabilities in the Public Service** is available to read and download at www.nda.ie.

Siobhán Barron

Director, National Disability Authority