



Massmart is creating more opportunities for people with disabilities

Unemployment figures from Statistics South Africa for 2008 reflect that just over 23% of South Africa's workforce is without full-time jobs. Many of the disabled persons representative bodies in the country estimate unemployment among disabled people to be four times as high.

Some of the challenges today's job-seekers with physical disabilities face include a lack of access to job-related skills training, a history of social isolation and common misperceptions about the productivity of disabled people on the part of potential employers. Combined, these obstacles have made employment nearly impossible for many South Africans with physical disabilities.

Massmart's objective is to employ more people with disabilities in permanent positions across the group and raise the total number of disabled employees to a minimum of 25. At Makro's newest store, Silver Lakes in Pretoria, 13 employees with physical disabilities are already benefiting from this initiative.

Makro Silver Lakes

"When we were building this store, I saw the lift installed in the staff entrance and I knew we had to put it to good use," says Du Toit Hoffman, store manager at Makro Silver Lakes. Hoffman saw to it that the Silver Lakes store employs 13 people with physical disabilities ranging from those in wheelchairs or on crutches to staff members who are hearing or vision impaired. For employees like Thomas Rikhotso and Peter Maluleka, it's been a chance to develop their skills within a thriving workplace.

Running The Call Centre

Thomas Rikhotso manages the customer care call centre at Makro Silver Lakes. He enters his office in his wheelchair through a specially fitted extra-wide door, parks it and takes up the seat behind his desk. "I was born disabled," says Rikhotso "and my mother insisted I make something of myself, so she sent me to special schools for disabled children. I later did volunteer work at one of the schools, but realised that if I sat with nothing but my school certificates in my hand waiting for an opportunity to come my way, I'd be waiting for a long time. The day I got the call for an interview here was the best day of my whole life. I can't explain the excitement I felt. For the first time, there was something happening to me."

Interaction And Learning

Rikhotso's colleague Peter Maluleka (34) is deaf and has been working at Makro Silver Lakes for the past year. Besides Maluleka's work at the Makro Wonderboom store in 2006, his current position as packer is his first full time job.

When manning the tillpoint, he does a lot of translating at the store. "I translate between hearing staff and deaf staff," he says, "and sometimes between the deaf staff with each other. Deaf people from different schools don't always understand each other, you know. It depends on if you learned to sign

in English or in Afrikaans. At this store, five of us sign in Afrikaans and three in English." To assist customers in understanding that Maluleka and his colleague are hearing impaired, their nametags indicate their disability.

Valuable Team Members

Store manager Hoffman says one of his criteria for hiring employees with disabilities includes finding people who can add to the team's success. "Yes, we have opened up opportunities for job-seekers with disabilities, but all our employees participate fully in the operations of this store. We open together, we lock up together and we all work weekends."

"We currently have another three positions we're still reserving for employees with disabilities," says human resources manager Busi Makgobotoane. "Two valuable team members were poached recently. We miss their contribution, of course, but we're also pretty happy we've been able to help them develop their careers."

Makro Silver Lakes is an example of how retailers can utilise the more diverse range of the personal skills employees with disabilities have to offer. "My ultimate goal," says Rikhotso, "is to leave my mark at this store. I want to leave behind a legacy of productive work and an improved call centre." ■



Image: iStockphoto

How to assist customers in a wheelchair or on crutches

1. Shoppers in wheelchairs may need assistance in reaching products from higher shelves.
2. Heavy items and/or bulky items like charcoal, dog food and long-life milk packs are difficult to transfer from the shelf from a wheelchair or while resting on crutches. Offer assistance to these customers when needed.