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Disability Best Practice

*View from the Chair, as published in the News Letter by,
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Last week, I was privileged to speak in the Long Gallery at Stormont at a seminar showcasing best practice on disability among Northern Ireland employers. The seminar recognised employers who had not merely complied with disability law, but had gone the extra mile to break down any barriers for disabled people entering and succeeding in their work place. It was organised by the Equality Commission in partnership with Employers for Disability and the Department of Employment and Learning.

People with disabilities are entitled to be full and equal participants in every aspect of society and we need to ensure that barriers which prevent that are removed. As many employers have proved, this can be achieved with a positive approach, engaging with and listening to staff to find out what changes will help them do their job. Some of the examples of innovation and excellence which were shared with us last week were an inspiration to all employers, large and small.

We heard about Belfast City Council's policy of guaranteeing a job interview for applicants with disabilities and about some of the practical steps the Council takes, such as the provision of a chair with back and neck supports for a receptionist with arthritis in his joints. I was particularly struck by the experiences of staff from the Todd's Leap Activity Centre, which operates a very comprehensive system of consultation, training and review to enable all its employees meet their full potential. The organisation gives expert advice and makes adjustments for each person's individual needs, so that they can be fully incorporated into its team. That is of great benefit to people with disabilities, but it is good practice for all staff.

The Disability Discrimination Act requires all businesses to make reasonable adjustments so that disabled people can work for them and access their services. Small practical changes can often provide the opportunity for people who are now excluded from work to participate in productive and rewarding jobs. These can include such arrangements as altered working hours or accommodating absences for medical treatment. It can also extend to modifying premises or providing specialist equipment which a disabled person can use.

What employers should not do is to rely on assumptions. Too often, it is thought that because a person has a disability, their capacity fully to contribute as an employee will be limited. Similarly, it is sometimes thought that making changes to premises or equipment is not warranted. This is where the best employers will take steps to find out what disabled employees and customers need; and will think about those who use the services they provide and make the adjustments that help them. Sometimes the most important adjustment is to change old established ways of thinking.

The Equality Commission can give advice to businesses about all these issues. We would hope to encourage as many as possible to follow the example of the employers whose staff and initiatives inspired all who heard them at last week's awards.