

People with low vision
and the role of disabled people in the society

1. Introduction

‘What is the most serious problem for the people with low vision?’

I am a member of Association of Low Vision in Japan. We are non-profitable citizen's group.

Our association was established in 1977 with catchwords "We regard low vision as one of disabilities" "Do not be serious alone. Share your problems together, and find the way together". Now we have almost 300 members all parts in Japan.

The most serious problem for us is "lack of understanding of existence of people with low vision" in society. Everyone knows the word "blind", and has an image of "A person with a white cane". But the word "low vision" is not so well known in our society, and many people cannot have a certain image of people with low vision.

Even at school, low vision students have to choose the textbook, Braille or normal print. The Ministry of Education does not give those students any large print textbook.

Now we mainly request the following things to the national government, local government, public sectors and private companies.

1. Give large print textbooks to the low vision students.
2. Promote large print books while solving the problem of copyright.
3. Have signs larger and clear to see.
4. Promote the employment of visually impaired including people with low vision.
5. Give more support for our indispensable goods like magnifiers, glasses, CCTV, etc.

We believe that the root of these problems is "lack of understanding about low vision". So we spend our energy to promote understanding of low vision. Through homepage, booklet, our meetings, we try to explain “what low vision is.”

2. My experience of developing "Accessible Design"

Once I was working for one of the major transport companies in Tokyo from April in 1985 to October in 2007. The main service of the company is "door-to-door parcel delivery". It is like a private mail parcel delivery service. This is a very convenient and popular service in Japan, not only for the non-disabled but also for the disabled people.

But we have a big problem for the disabled customers to use our service. When a customer is not at his/her home or office, our staff leave a message card in the post. On

this card we only printed our telephone number with message. The visually impaired customers cannot read any letters on the card. For them our message card was only a piece of white paper with no meaning. The deaf customers cannot use telephone, so for them our telephone number had no meaning. Additionally our staffs had a problem. They could not deliver parcels properly, because they believed everyone could access our message card without any problems.

It occurred to me an idea that we had to improve our message card more convenient for every customer, including disabled customers from the business point of view. Soon our company printed fax number on the card. But to accomplish the goal fully, I had to have thousands times of discussions with many staffs in the company to persuade them.

More than 10 years of discussion, finally I succeeded to improve our message card. In 1997 we put small notches on both sides of the card to distinguish what is this card for without sight assistance. In 1999 we start internet message service. This internet service is also convenient for non-disabled customers. Through these improvements, our company treat disabled people as customers in a true meaning.

3. Importance of cooperation and alliance both sides, disabled group and non-disabled group

From my experience, I learned it was required the cooperation with non-disabled people to change an inconvenience into a convenience. This means I have to give an idea of solution not only for the disabled customers but also for non-disabled customers. At the same time I have to give an idea to put some profit for our company. This is business approach.

To my success, The Accessible Design Foundation of Japan plays an important role. In this foundation I had opportunities to have many friends who aimed for the same goal, "developing Accessible Design". They support strongly my idea, and they have been continuously giving me various advices to accomplish my goal. Their advice was "be on both business side and disabled side. They always encourage me by saying "You are the one who can do that."

They value my experience as a person with low vision. I am so impressed and appreciated their understanding and warm heart.

At company I learned "business approach was indispensable" even to solve the problem of disabled people. At first it was very difficult for me. I believed I was right

and what I told was justice. Through many discussions the member of the company tried to give me a strong message. "To get a solution, do not be so emotional. Have business-like conversation". The most important thing to succeed this improvement was the disabled people never asked for a special price discount to our company. They need to pay the same price as non-disabled customers. Then our company decided to improve the message card. The company learned from disabled customers that promotion of the accessible service for everyone gave profits to the company.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, disabled group always try to request or ask for something to national, local government and public sectors to solve their problem. This is an important part of approach to get their goal. I never deny this method. I would like to add following things for the activities of group of people with disabilities.

1. Have alliance with all parts of society, national government, public government, associations and centers for disabled, NPO groups, business enterprises, and people in public.
2. Be an effective information center, and human resource center.
3. Accept not only the welfare approach but also the economic and business approach to solve our problems.
4. Be on the same table to get solution, instead of request, complain or criticize.
5. Give your ideas to promote design for all people.

(by Yuko HAGA)