

Star Social Firms
www.guardian.co.uk
18 December 2007

societyguardian.co.uk

Another way into work

Sally Reynolds, head of Social Firms UK, explains how her charity helps provide sustainable employment opportunities for disabled and severely disadvantaged people



Sally Reynolds, head of Social Firms

Plans for Britain's largest employer of disabled people to close factories met with heated protests this year. Despite months of political wrangling, a significant number of Remploy's factories look finally set to close. While this will cause terrible job losses it will also divert massive funds and resources to create mainstream employment for disabled people.

According to the Office of National Statistics, nearly one in five, or 6.9 million, people of working age in Britain are disabled. Almost half of them are currently unemployed. While efforts to create mainstream employment must be applauded, many disabled people face huge barriers and some are just too far away from the current criteria needed for mainstream employment. A sustainable alternative to social service-led efforts is desperately needed and an emerging sector of social enterprise may hold the answer.

Social firms provide employment opportunities for severely disadvantaged people. The workforce of every social firm includes at least one quarter of severely disadvantaged people. The roles disabled and disadvantaged people take on are real jobs in a market-led environment. In Britain alone, the number of companies registered with Social Firms has increased from just five businesses in 1997 to 137 in 2007. Social firms have created the equivalent of 1,625 full-time jobs, 861 of which are held by severely disadvantaged people.

If this emerging sector is going to reach its potential in helping those disadvantaged people who cannot retain mainstream employment, major support is needed. Businesses and the public sector can help by procuring from social firms. Like every other business they thrive on custom, not charity - so companies should look at their supply chain to see if social firms can be included. Public sector organisations like the NHS and big businesses like IBM have already started buying from these firms.

To help more people understand the sector a quality mark has been created. In the same vein as the Fairtrade mark for ethically traded goods, this award highlights each example as Star Social Firm. Every enterprise with this status has been through an independent evaluation to prove it is a first-rate business providing high quality products or services, as well as excellent employment opportunities for severely disadvantaged people. The Star Social Firm quality mark will be officially launched in February 2008.

While still in the early stages, the scheme has proven successful. But if it is to pull more people into social inclusion and economic empowerment, increased procurement from the private and public sector is essential.

- Sally Reynolds is CEO of Social Firms UK, the charity dedicated to supporting Social Firms. For more information please see www.socialfirms.co.uk