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# Business Standard

SOUTH

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For an IT company, says Bharath Natarajan, senior vice-president of Polaris Financial Technology, physical ability is less important than the ability to think and communicate. Laser Soft Info Systems, a company owned by Polaris, embodies this idea.

At Laser Soft, an initiative called Sampada (Special Appreciation and Mentoring Programme Acknowledging the Differently Abled) brings employees who are people with disability (PWDs) or Differently Abled People (DAPs), into mainstream operations. "What we need here is commitment, and we see that from differently abled people,"

says Natarajan. "They are working in all parts of the office and are a motivation to others in performance and commitment."

Sampada was launched by Suresh Kamath, Laser Soft's founder and managing director and now President and Chief Architect of Polaris Financial Technology Ltd. Polaris acquired Laser Soft in 2009. The first differently abled employee to join Laser Soft, then situated in Nungambakkam, was S M Parthasarathy. He is currently associate vice president, technology and deals with important clients of the company.

Of the 600 associates at Laser Soft's Business Solution Centre (BSC), 93, or 15 per cent of the workforce, are differently abled.



PHOTOS: PRANAV VINAYAKAN

Inside Laser Soft, which looks like any ordinary office (left), disabled and other employees can be seen working side by side; two disabled employees (below left) at work

## The chosen ones

Employees with disabilities are thriving at a Chennai software and technology firm, courtesy a working environment created to suit their needs

PWDs are distributed across teams like support, delivery and project management. "We don't have any rule that teams must take a minimum or maximum number of PWDs in their roles. They are recruited like any other associate," Kamath explains.

The company tries to give its DAP employees a suitable work environment, from commuting to parking, ramps, toilet handrails, extra-wide office aisles (especially at entrance and exit), spacious lifts, special chairs, an audio system in the lift for the visually impaired, special seating arrangements in the cafeteria, "facilitators" to assist PWDs, and an alternative to the turnstile at the security check.

Employees are seated so that if there is an emergency they can easily reach the exits. Fire drills were recently conducted to make sure the system works. Sampada's objective, says Kamath, is to help

causes of disability among Laser Soft employees include polio, cerebral palsy, accidents, and hearing, speech and sight impairment. The severity of disability ranges from 65 per cent to 95 per cent. Apart from providing a DAP-friendly work environment, Polaris also offers free accommodation close to the office, and the option to work from home.

"There are hundreds of people

looking for an opportunity to work," says 41-year-old M Veeramallu, a project manager. "They are people with commitment and need the opportunity to prove themselves." Born in Andhra Pradesh into a farming family, Veeramallu went to work as a labourer for a construction company in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. In 1993, he met with an accident at the site. He fell from the second floor because somebody else made a mistake, and his spine broke in two.

"I had to re-learn everything," he says. "Working with computers was my dream, though it was a distant dream at that time."

Veeramallu completed a one-year diploma in computer programming at Jeevana Jyothi in Chennai and started looking for a job. "Then I started facing barriers. Some offices were on the first floor. In some there was no proper toilet facility for me while at others, there was no vacancy," he says. In 2001, he joined Laser Soft and gradually became the project head, with 25 people working in his team. "Sampada is not a CSR initiative," he says firmly. "It is a business model."

Companies like IBM and Scope International, a subsidiary of Standard Chartered, are also hiring DAPs now — but they hire experienced people, unlike Laser Soft which is happy to appoint new faces and train them, says Veeramallu.

