

The Road to Nowhere No More - Jumping onto a "New Curve" of Disability Reform

In his 1994 book, *"The Empty Raincoat"*, futurist Charles Handy put forward a theory of organisational development that became known as his "sigmoid theory". He suggested that the return on investment of any enterprise over time can be plotted in a series of "S" shaped curves. Central to his theory was his observation that every enterprise gets to a point where continuing to do things the way they have always been done no longer provides the return on investment it once did. When that happens he suggested the enterprise needs to "jump on to a new curve" - a new approach, a new market, a new product line, a new business model. Handy was relating mainly to the business sector, but his theory makes sense in any "enterprise", including the "disability reform enterprise", and, indeed, in society as a whole.

We need to jump off onto a new curve in the way we approach disability reform, based on two key principles: first, we need to stop thinking about the money that needs to be spent on disability reform as a "welfare cost" and start thinking about it as an investment in Australia's future; and second, we need to move out of the "laboratory stage" of the reform process that we've been in for the last 30 years (at least), and in to the "integration stage".

Let's start with the absolute basics: is this a solvable problem, or is there something inherent in disability itself that means that, whatever we do, once a person has a disability she or he simply can't participate in society? If the latter is true, then maybe as a "caring, sharing" society we just have to accept this and support people as best we can through the welfare system.

Let's put that one to bed. The many thousands of people with all types and all severities of disability who are working in well paid, full-time employment and in all levels of education, are proving one vital thing: it is not the disability itself that's the problem!

I believe there are three fundamental reasons why so many people with disabilities stay at home on the Disability Support Pension:

- the massive infrastructure barriers we face make every day hard work (we've spent inestimable trillions of dollars building this world without taking the basic needs of people with disabilities into account);
- the community still doesn't believe people with disabilities can participate fully in society;
- and many people with disabilities have never built the life skills to give them the knowledge, strength and confidence they need to deal with all of this.

Let's think about that in dollar terms. Every form of transport needs to be accessible, every building needs to be accessible, everything that is written needs to be accessible in alternative format, everything that is spoken needs to be captioned, everyone who needs a bit of help needs that help. The bill? Trillions of dollars. Much less with universal design and smart thinking, but still many orders of magnitude more than we are currently spending.

"That's unreasonable" I hear the world saying. But hang on; we don't seem to think it's unreasonable that we spend trillions of dollars on the "average" person. What am I missing here?

What I'm missing is that the community doesn't think people with disabilities can participate anyway, so doesn't see the point in removing the barriers that stop them doing so. Can that be fixed? Of course it can - it's called "social marketing". We need a properly resourced national marketing strategy presenting quality images of people with disabilities to the Australian people every day and every night for three years. The bill? A billion dollars would do the trick.

And can we teach the life skills to build the strength and confidence of people with disabilities to participate in society? We sure can. We've done it in micro-pilot sites many times, now we need to do it for everyone who needs it. The bill? Hundreds of millions of dollars.

So we need to spend a lot more money. But what on? Certainly not on any more pilot programs, consulting studies, user surveys. We know what needs to be done. We've been experimenting with different ideas, different approaches, new ways of providing support in the "disability laboratory" for 30 years or more. And we needed to go through this laboratory stage - 30 years ago we didn't fully understand how best to support people with disabilities in education, in the workforce, in the community generally.

It has gone on far longer than it needed to, but the hard work hasn't been in vain. It has given us workable solutions to virtually every problem we have faced. Our task now is to roll those solutions out across the country to everyone who needs them, and we need to provide the investment funding needed to do so. We need to **integrate** those solutions into every mainstream structure, system and process in our society. And we need to transfer ownership of the disability reform process from the specialised laboratory to the mainstream. Disability reform is everyone's business.

In practical terms that means no more "wheelchair accessible taxi service" - we need a taxi service (and a universal taxi) that meets everyone's needs including people with disabilities. No more "modified housing" - make houses accessible in the first place through smart design. No more "special needs" this and "special needs" that. We need to adopt the "universal design" principle across every aspect of our society.

And this is not just about the fact that a second rate, poor quality product or service makes it hard work to be as productive as the "average" citizen, it is also about the demoralising effect of being treated as a second or third class citizen. It puts people's fire out.

I can hear the screams of "unjustifiable hardship" already. "Talk to the hand" - I'm sick of hearing it. Either you provide your products, services and programs (private sector and government) to every citizen who wants them or we revoke your Licence to Operate. If it costs you money to do so, fine - add it to the cost of the product just like you already do to meet your legal and fiduciary requirements, OH&S responsibilities, etc. We're not trying to put you out of business here! And we've already accepted the principle - it's captured in the Disability Discrimination Act. We need to put the DDA on steroids.

My greatest frustration with all of this is that all of it is achievable. We are not trying to move the moon out of its orbit here, folks. There is only one thing that will stop all of this happening, and that's our combined will to make it happen. And until all of us who "get it" (whether we are directly

affected by disability or not) use our influence to get the rest of society to give this the attention it so desperately needs, we will remain on Charles Handy's "old curve". And that's a road to nowhere.