

Distinguished athletes,

Distinguished guests,

Recently I had the privilege to meet with Special Olympics athletes Evy Ploegaerts and André Schepers in person. After some small talk, they shared their insights and experienced barriers in the workplace with me. Eye-opening and confronting. Even being extremely motivated and keen on working in a 'normal' company environment, job opportunities were below expectations. Evy reckons that this problem is due to both the actual education system as to societal attitudes towards intellectual disabled. I quote "Special education doesn't offer students a basic knowledge of, for instance, English and French. Schools and teachers don't believe in talents of intellectual disabled, so they don't expect anything from them. While they don't expect anything from them, they don't invest in them", Evy complaints. If her parents wouldn't have done the utmost to give her all the chances, she would be no-where, she told me. Evy was put to work in a so-called sheltered workshop. A job far beneath her ambitions and talents... That employers see intellectually disabled as no more than very cheap working forces makes her sad and angry.

André had the luck to work in what we call "the regular labor Circuit", in a common company. Without any warnings or early feedback, he received the cold message that his work was a bit beneath expectations. He lost his job. Luckily he has great parents and a nice girlfriend. They bought a house, will renovate it and, after his golden medal, he is determined to find a good job. He learned from his mistakes, he had to discover himself. Just like Evy his is a great communicator with tremendous social skills. Thanks to her testimony, Evy convinced Belfius not only to sponsor the games. More than 750 Belfius collaborators serve as volunteers during the games! Believe me, Evy and André and so many others can make things happen. They make a difference!

Ladies and gentlemen,
Distinguished guests,

In our rapidly changing society, with a tight job market and the common knowledge in mind “that soon every single talent and skill is needed, without exception”, it is hard to understand that we leave so many people aside.

Especially because providing good jobs for as many people as possible regardless inabilities create a true win-win for the society as well as for employees. Indeed, a job provides meaning, sense and fulfillment, pride and self-awareness.

We still have a long way to go and that’s why we are gathered here today. Even if so many intellectual disabled and especially these athletes work extremely hard, society often considers them as less important and far from equal. This mentality gap must be closed.

Therefore I congratulate the Antwerp Management School board and the Special Olympics Committee for the daring choice of today’s actual Symposium theme.

It is an excellent initiative in the margin of these ongoing Games of the heart. Games that appeal to all of us and to you, dear athletes, your families, companions, fellow entrepreneurs and assistants, in specific. By making such brave choices, this institute shows that it has the guts to stray off the beaten track and is able to tackle so-called blind spots in the field.

Moreover, I’m convinced that the timing of this scientific symposium couldn’t be better. It is probably no coincidence at all that this research was conducted on a crucial political moment for Belgium and Flanders. On this right moment, ministers and politicians are fundamentally rethinking and reshaping the vision on care of disabled people in society. The new direction is clear: future policy will focus on personal needs and talents in the first place and subsequently on the infrastructure that helps them leading a normal life. I hope these

sound like music in your ears. For that's probably the best attitude you and everyone here present is longing and eventually hoping for.

It is that message that Special Olympics and AMS have fully understood through their recent study: focus on full inclusion in teams, on achievements and the strengths of every athlete or employee involved. Encourage where necessary. Preferably in a lively, warm-hearted and challenging environment. Isn't that, ladies and gentlemen, the very essence of valuable 'people management' in general?

This motto also characterizes our provincial G-Sports working. In almost 213 sporting clubs, more than 6000 motivated G-sportsmen and –women enjoy their weekly get-together. We want to offer them a challenging and state of the art sporting future by integrating these athletes in society through the power of healthy sports. I would dare to say that the fact that Special Olympics are organized here, in Antwerp, is the coronation of their hard work. That is why we feel particularly privileged to welcome the delegations from 58 countries for 12 days of joy and friendship . Let there be no doubt: our province supports these games of the heart enthusiastically and the expectations about the AMS research were high.

Since last week, today and for the upcoming days, Antwerp shows the world that bringing athletes together in a dynamic atmosphere of sports opens our hearts. Without bias or prejudice, we give each athlete the opportunity to compete with others. Inclusion is the key. Not only because sports are fun, give faith and outstanding performances generate respect, but also because these warm games of the heart show that what really matters in society: that everyone finds his or her place within it, no matter what your restrictions or capabilities are. We indeed need an "inclusion revolution", as stated by Timothy Shriver at the opening ceremony last Saturday. Today, we projected that insight on how, in an ideal world, we could implement that in a business context. Here, the same rules apply: working together can be inspiring, add unexpected perspectives and contribute to creative solutions that fit better in diverse societies. Although the daily challenges might be big, sincere inclusion and working together can and should be great fun!

I admit that our province, along with other companies for over the past years, have shown not enough courage to give full inclusion a decent chance. The outcome of the present study and symposium must help us to change that as from today on. I gladly share this Antwerp vision of an inclusive society and most important insights with you. I truly hope that they become strong guidelines for a sustainable mentality switch.

The Antwerp Vision on an inclusive society

1. **Aceptance:** People with intellectual disabilities are accepted as equals and are treated with respect.
2. **Networks:** People with intellectual disabilities are embedded in their local communities and networks (sports clubs, schools, hobby clubs, parents organizations, work places ...).
3. **Together:** People with intellectual disabilities interact socially with others, whether they have intellectual disabilities or not.
4. **Work:** People with intellectual disabilities have custom-made jobs and tailored opportunities for work, vocational training and experience. They are specialists in their own professional field.
5. **Education:** Full inclusion is achieved because mutual respect and comprehension are learned from a very young age. By investing in inclusion for children, society invests in a consolidated future for everyone.
6. **Raise their voices:** People with intellectual disabilities have a voice: they are involved in decisions that affect them and their community because a different perspective can provide added value.
7. **Pay:** Through paid employment, people with intellectual disabilities have more autonomy, higher self-esteem and a better well-being.
8. **Talents:** The focus is on the talents, skills and competences of people with intellectual disabilities, not on their shortcomings.

9. **Economy & society:** The balance between organizational, economical and societal needs are key challenges or priorities to our business leaders and managers.
10. **Now or Never, Mr Presidents!** Wherever impossible to close, at least change, improve, enhance and open doors for those who want to help. Our governments and institutions lead the way to an inclusive society.

Last but not least, I thank Antwerp Management School and especially researcher Joke Schrauwen and research director Bart Cambré. Your interesting findings are of great importance and will definitely be shared by many. Especially because you conducted this inclusive research in the true spirit of 'the Antwerp vision on an inclusive society': together with Evy and André as colleagues, experts and athletes, the project was set up and finished. They were actively involved so it was literally a study 'with' and not 'on' people with an intellectual disability. To all athletes as well as to the Special Olympics Committee: good luck and all the best during these Games of the heart!