

Job creation for people with special needs

Group hopes to launch mushroom farm, provide suitable work conditions

■ BY CHERYL ONG

A MUSHROOM farm could be launched in a year's time by a cooperative started by parents of more than a dozen people with intellectual disabilities.

The mission of the Employment for Persons with Intellectual Disability (E4PID) co-op is to generate jobs tailored to the needs of such people.

A cooperative is a business organisation owned and operated by a group of individuals for their mutual benefit.

E4PID's leader, Mr Ong Chin Wah,

former chairman of the Down Syndrome Association Singapore, said the co-op is in talks with existing mushroom-farming businesses and hopes to have the enterprise up and running by next year.

He estimates that the business will need \$150,000 in the first year to stay sustainable. The amount will be raised from parents and supporting organisations.

"Most of the time, we try to make the person with the disability match the job but the environment and task given to them may not be suitable," he said, explaining why the co-op is taking a job-customisation approach.

The long-term goal is to find new businesses that can tap the skills of people with special needs.

Mr Ong hopes the mushroom business will take root quickly and develop into a profitable enterprise.

"It's not the same as a VWO (volunteer welfare organisation). We want to run it as a business so whatever profit we make goes back into developing this farm," he said.

The E4PID is applying to be formally recognised as a co-op with the Singapore National Cooperative Federation (SNCF). When this is done, it will be able to ride on the expertise of the 70 co-ops in the federation.

Mr Ong hopes that methods to make for easier work in the farm could be developed via collaborations with research groups that may be linked to enterprises in the SNCF.

Co-op member Bernard Yu, 46, is excited about the possibilities for his six-year-old daughter who has been diagnosed with autism.

The private-fund investment adviser said mushroom farming is easy to pick up and suits people with special needs since they cope with repetitive tasks very well.

Although it is still a long way before his daughter finishes her studies and joins the workforce, he admits that he often worries about her future.

He and his homemaker wife have three other children.

He said: "It will be a big relief for me if I know that my child is working in a place where the job is customised to the person and that the company is working towards the collective welfare of the special needs employees and their parents."

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