

“Supermen with unusual power” are shining here!

K.K. Isetan Mitsukoshi Soleil

☆ Points

1. PWDs have much better abilities than ABPs
2. Training staff who are familiar with the jobs develop all-around players
3. Turning PWDs' employment into a successful business

Filling more than 100 positions of the auxiliary jobs

Isetan Mitsukoshi Group is putting out its new corporate message “*this is Japan.*” which is focused on the traditional sensibilities of the Japanese people. In April 2015, OTC staff were serving customers wearing a badge stating their respective messages such as “I love Japan” and “I have rice for breakfast”, while backup staff were doing their respective jobs. Employees with disabilities, those who play leading roles in “Isetan Mitsukoshi Soleil”, wear a badge saying “Superman with unusual power”, while their training staff wear a badge saying “Assistant to superman with unusual power”.



Badge “Superman with unusual power” attached to the chest of working PWDs

Badge “Assistant to superman with unusual power” on Managing Director and other training staff



Managing Director Masakuni Shioden said, “‘Unusual power’ means a superior skill to others or a unique and distinctive ability. Those who can work properly are ‘supermen’, not only those who have unusual power. The word a ‘person with disability’ would give a negative image and disadvantaged, and cause a feeling of strangeness to me. In the department store business, it is difficult for them to serve customers. On the other hand, OTC staff who are so-called able-bodied persons cannot work precisely and continuously

like the Soleil staff. They have a much better operational capability. That is why they are ‘supermen with unusual power’. Training staff, including me, assist such important people so that they can reach their maximum capabilities. At Isetan Mitsukoshi, OTC staff is placed at the top priority. Similarly, at Soleil, our operation staff is the most important human resource.



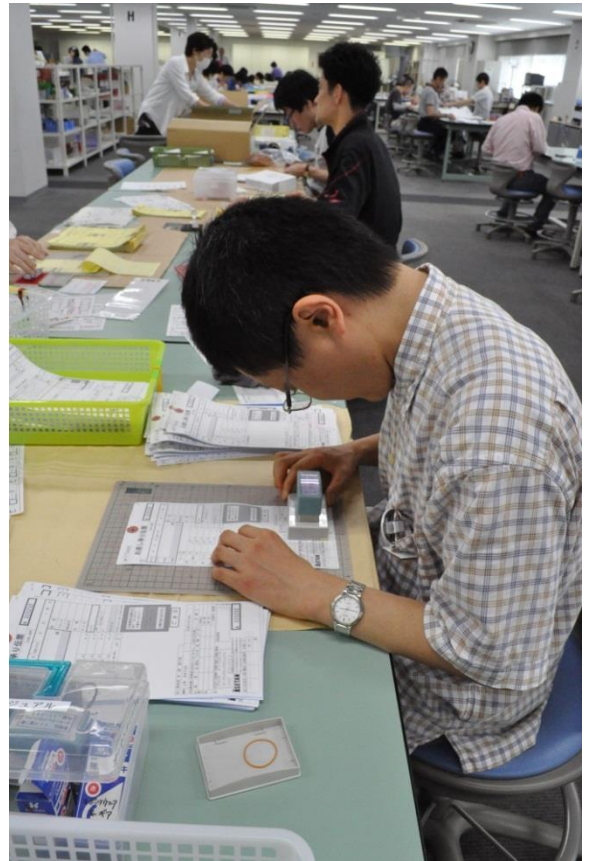
Ochiai Center, Isetan Mitsukoshi Soleil

At the center of Isetan Mitsukoshi Soleil, 64 PWDs (60 with intellectual disabilities and 4 with physical disabilities) do more than one hundred types of work in four separate spaces with the total area of 1,300 m² together with 7 training staff. On the interview day, about 15 types of auxiliary jobs are performed, including sorting copies of slips by credit companies and checking for any mistakes, which enable the accounting staff to focus on their original job, doubling shopping bags for heavy goods such as bottled food, canned food and liquor bottles, affixing the stamp precisely on slips to be provided to customers, and making ribbons for gift wrapping and so on. Mr. Shioden and the other training staff have made supportive devices so that anyone can do their job.

Sorting slips of credit cards

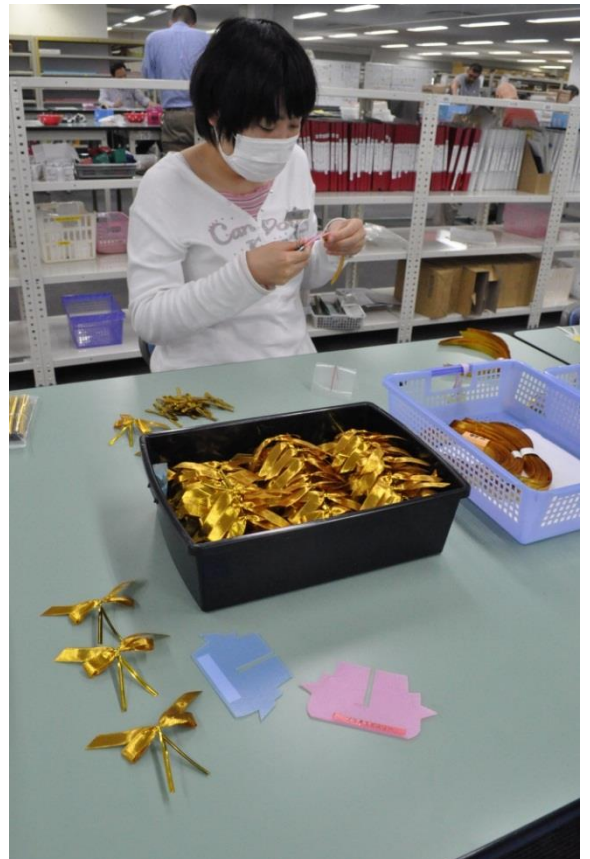
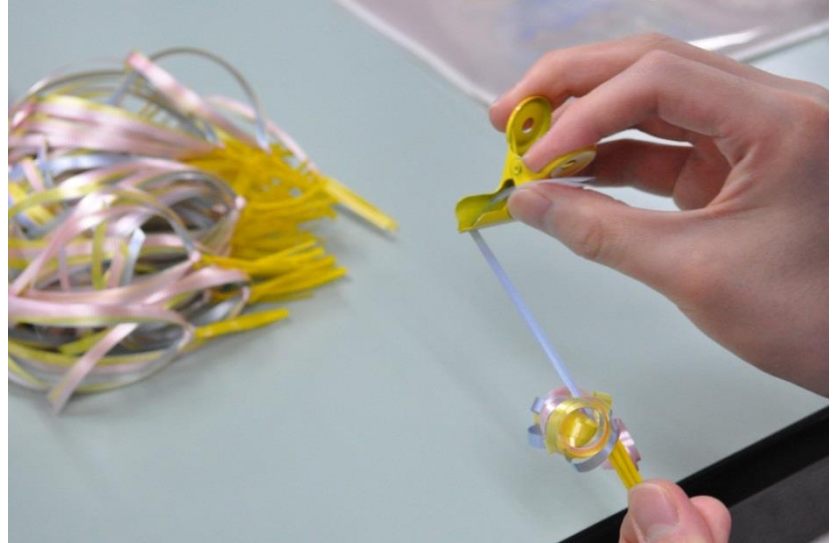


Doubling shopping bags



Affixing the date stamp at the designated position on the slip

“A seal consisting of curled ribbons, which is used for gift wrapping, is very popular among our customers, and we make more than 20,000 sets in the Christmas season. Our work varies according to the season. Before Valentine Day, Mother’s Day or Father’s Day, everyone may need to do the work making gift boxes so we try to educate them so that they can do any job. They know what to do today just after coming to the center in the morning but they are flexible enough. Those with severe autism are not confused even when their work is changed unexpectedly. They can cope with any on-the-spot job, such as affixing a correction seal to the catalog, to the extent that is satisfactory to customers.”
5 PWDs (3 with intellectual disabilities and 2 with physical disabilities) work at the Shinjuku Center. The number of staff in the two centers accounts for 86 including seconded staff.



Making ribbons for
gift wrapping

Doing excellent work produces more jobs.

Isetan Mitsukoshi Soleil (originally called Isetan Soleil and changed to the current name upon the merger between Mitsukoshi and Isetan in 2011) was born in 2004. Mr. Shioden, the second managing director, has been involved since the setting up stage of the company. He was in charge of not only college graduates and part-time workers, but also the PWDs' employment during these three years in the HR Department. Immediately before being transferred to a special subsidiary company, he was responsible for marketing planning such as Jewelry, paintings, kimono for VIP customers.

"Challenging new ideas is the corporate culture in Isetan Mitsukoshi. When the employment rate of PWDs had decreased from the peak 1.93% to 1.70%, the President at that time gave the HR Department the mission to take PWDs' employment seriously. Given the mission by the HR Manager, I started with three basic targets: recruiting PWDs, identifying jobs that they can handle, and developing a comfortable working environment for them. Soleil was supposed to start with about 10 PWDs but the training staff was only myself. I recruited an applicant in the job posting system, and Ms. Yuko Sasatani who was doing great work in the men's wear department joined me."

"When I look back, it was very good that both of us were not experts of PWDs' employment. Otherwise, we would have hesitated, thinking we should not assign this work to them or they would not be able to handle this work. Being inexperienced was our strongest point."

They started operations with 10 PWDs in an area of 84 m². However, they had no idea of what kind of work PWDs could do. They then asked job coaches of employment agencies or PWDs vocational centers, and NGOs.

"The first job that we assigned to them was folding in fours, an application for our House Card and putting it in an envelope together with two copies of a letter. We were assigned to prepare one hundred sets per year but they took only one and a half months. They can do simple and repetitive works properly and precisely. PWDs recruited from Support for Continuous Employment Type B Services (*1) demonstrated their good performance."

Ms. Sasatani and Mr. Shioden tried to find auxiliary jobs for PWDs.

"The core work of department stores is sales. All sales staff say that it would be a great help for somebody else to do the auxiliary jobs, such as affixing the stamp to slips, making ribbons and doubling shopping bags, instead of them especially while they are servicing customers. We offered to do it free of charge."



Ms. Yuko Sasatani who was voluntarily transferred from the menswear department to Soleil

Sales staff was somewhat doubtful about the ability of PWDs.

“However, I myself was confident. After we visited about ten stores, jobs started coming to us regularly, amounting to more than one hundred types. It is more efficient to share auxiliary jobs with PWDs. I was glad that the sales staff recognized that PWDs can do great work.”

Contributing to the core business and its operational improvement

Along with the increasing number of PWD employees, the working space has gradually expanded from 84 m² and has reached to 1,300 m² since last August.

“The headquarters’ management has fully recognized their excellent performance and importance. The President and directors who visited the training center next door came by to say ‘Thank you, it is helpful and great job’ to them. What is important is that we do jobs directly linked with the core business and contribute to its operation improvement. In other words, the top management has admitted that Soleil employees are human resources which are creating profits.”

Soleil works are 100% ordered from Isetan Mitsukoshi Group, and have been increasing each year.

“As our buyers are Isetan Mitsukoshi Group, we don’t charge them. Buyers deliver materials to us, and we do the manual jobs. To ensure the accuracy of our work, we request buyers at least one week of lead time. Training staff control the balance between workloads and production capacity so as to prevent any overtime work. The labor cost which accounts for 97% of our cost is absorbed by the headquarters. This is why we don’t need to charge the buyers.”

If the sales staff does the auxiliary work ordered to Soleil, it would take about 5,000 hours per month. If each store outsources them, it would cost over 100 million yen. Mr. Shioden clearly said PWDs’ employment is a business.



Writing on slips

“While it is important to comply with the statutory employment rate of PWDs (1.8%) as part of our corporate social responsibilities, we also need to contribute to the core business. If their job is not for the company’s profit, they would not realize that they are really working. An employee contributes to the profit of a company and gets paid according to their work. This is what the relationship between an employee and a company should be. As I am a business person, I always keep in mind that the PWDs’ employment is a business. Otherwise, PWD’s employment would not achieve sustainable growth.”

Extending the ability of persons with severe disabilities

Soleil has mainly recruited from Support for Continuous Employment Type B Services after we determine whether they can work at workplace training. There are six employees who are at Level 2 (severe) of “Ai no Techo (PWD card)” issued by Tokyo Metropolis (*2). If parents of a person with severe disabilities get hope, seeing other persons with similar disabilities get employed, it makes recruitment easier. Mr. Shioden said, “I prefer persons with severe disabilities”.

“When we employ a person with severe disabilities, we try to find the best way that he or she can work properly, which results in better capabilities of the training staff. Our training staff is excellent. Before starting work, a new employee is supported by employment support agencies on the commutation route, but they can cope with any unexpected train delay properly.”

Of the 7 training staff, 4 are seconded from the headquarters. Of the remaining 3, 2 used to work for Isetan.

“If we have background knowledge, we would limit their abilities. We tend to label their abilities by PWDs such as people with autism can not change work in the middle. However, we all are inexperienced and wonder if they really can or not do it. The reason why they cannot do it is because they have never learned it. If they learn it, they can do it. Even for writing on slips, with repeated practice, they can now write to the extent that it can be presented to customers. However, they tend to be passive so encouraging them to do something is our role. I want to break out of the stereotype image of PWDs.”

Ten years have elapsed since the establishment of Soleil. An increasing number of the headquarters’ employees are applying to be transferred to Soleil, from whom training staff will be selected.

“Those who train for a job should be familiar with that work. This is why I don’t think we need to invite an external expert. What is needed to enable them to work by making the best of their abilities, is simply drilling them constantly. It takes a few years to acquire how to do a job, but all of the work is for the company. We accept their strong and weak points, but not likes and dislikes.”

Their employment status is as a temporary employee, equivalent to a part-time employee of the headquarters. Welfare packages are also the same, except the hourly wage, which is 895 yen. Including a bonus, the hourly wage effectively exceeds 1,000 yen. Weekly days off are Wednesday and Sunday.

“We used to be off on Tuesdays, which was the department stores’ holiday, and Wednesday. As it is good to take a rest in the middle of a week, we have set Wednesdays as a day off. If they work for a consecutive five days, their performance would get worse near the end of a week. In addition, hospitals and resorts are less crowded on weekdays. Most of them are “rail fans.”

During break times, they take their time alone, rather than talking to each other.

“As most of them have severe disabilities, break time varies. I think this is acceptable. When someone is mimicking an announcement at a station during work time, I would tell him, ‘You can do it during break time.’ I try to get them aware that the company is a place where they work and earn money.”

Care about them, but not spoil them

Ms. Sasatani who has been involved in Soleil since its setup has voluntarily been transferred to a special subsidiary company.

“I had worked in the menswear department for fifteen years and was thinking about my carrier path. One of my juniors found a new job in welfare services. I also had the chance to serve customers with visual or hearing difficulties. These made me think what I can do for them. Just then, I found the job posting system and decided to take on a new challenge. Ten years have flown by so quickly. I have been growing together with my colleagues and the company. What I have been respecting most is ‘treating them normally’.”

The elder sister of Ms. Sasatani has hearing difficulties.

“As I have grown up knowing there are people who have disabilities, it is normal for me not to perceive them as special. I do care about them, but not spoil them. We all work hard together and get paid. I am so glad to see them growing slowly but surely.”

We interviewed two PWDs who have worked for ten years or more.

Mr. Fumichika Shimura joined Soleil in 2005 at age 20. He especially likes stamping the date stamp. He said, “It was hard for me to align it at the center, but after practice at home, I am now able to do it properly. I enjoy working but get tired every day.” He likes buying lottery

tickets and had even won 10,000 yen. On holidays, he also enjoys travelling to hot springs with his parents. He added, “Both my elder brother and elder sister are already married. I think my dream is marriage.”



Mr. Fumichika Shimura (left) and Mr. Taiyo Sato being interviewed during break time

Mr. Taiyo Sato who joined Soleil in 2005 is good at sorting credit card slips without any weak points. He said, “I practiced affixing the date stamp every day after coming back from work. It is difficult to stamp it properly.” He uses his salary to buy videos or have sushi. On holidays, he goes bowling or visits Work Support (an extra-municipal organization which support living and employment of PWDs). He sometimes goes to the hospital to see his mother. He added, “My dream is that my mother will get better. I am busy but want to keep working.”

PWDs can also be developed

Mr. Shioden stressed his philosophy of the PWDs’ employment.

“I don’t like the stereotype that persons with intellectual disabilities are better suited for cleaning work. I see them individually to find what abilities they have, what they are good at and how they can contribute to the company, not collectively as PWDs. It’s possible that they can do any job to some extent even if they are not so good at it. This is exactly the same as when treating colleagues and junior staff at the headquarters. Everything is human resource development.”

Training staff are dedicated to keep operations smooth by elaborately assigning work to each of them.

“I, as a business person, am trying to maximize the abilities of my junior staff, regardless of whether or not they are PWDs, based on the mission assigned to me. PWDs have abilities but people don’t try to draw them out. I am a bit proud of extracting their potential.”

Mr. Shioden who is a substantial founder of Soleil has worked as Managing Director for ten years, and is now going to pass the baton.

“Offering a new product from a fresh dimension is one of the qualifications of department store employees. Soleil now has enough of a workload to accept more employees. I think it is time for me to pass the baton to the next generation. As the system has been already established, I want them to add new spice from a new perspective. I am really keen to see how Soleil is growing. Without Soleil, every store would have difficulties. Soleil and the staff working there are essential to all Isetan Mitsukoshi stores.

Contributing to the core business and demonstrating its presence in operational improvement at the headquarters. – He strongly showed his positive and business-minded PWDs’ employment.

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Camera : Hirotaka Koyama

Enlightenment media of “ [Japan Organization for Employment of the Elderly, Persons with Disabilities and Job Seekers](#)”.

(*1) Support for Continuous Employment Type B Services

Welfare working centers where PWDs who are deemed to have difficulty with working. Monthly wage is about 10,000 yen.

(*2) Level 2 (severe) of “Ai no Techo (PWD card)” issued by Tokyo Metropolis

Tokyo Metropolis categorized persons with intellectual disabilities are categorized into four levels; Profound (Level 1), Severe (Level 2), Moderate (Level 3) and Mild (Level 4). As Level 1 requires constant medical treatment (e.g. oxygen inhalation), Level 2 is effectively the highest level, with an IQ from 20 to 34.