

A Welcome
to
Workability International Europe
from
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson

In Iceland we have witnessed a transformation in the contribution that people with disabilities make to our society and everyday activity in the workplace. Our lives have been enriched by this experience and our thinking and vision have been shaped in a new way. We now realise that each and every one can make a difference and the definition of who is able and who is disabled depends largely on social norms and the traditional way of thinking. By changing our mindset we can lay the foundation for wide-ranging reforms.

Involvement by people with disabilities in many different fields of employment in our country has brought hope and fulfilment and radically altered the boundaries of what is deemed possible. In this respect people with disabilities have been significant reformers through their own actions and have given the nation a new sense of itself. They have created an engine of social change and its power can be felt well beyond the daily routine.

We often talk about reforms to benefit people with disabilities as if they are restricted to a peripheral group and we forget the fundamental impact that their active involvement can have through the labour market on the core values of society and how it evolves towards the future. The position of people with disabilities is a mirror which reflects ourselves.

By hosting the Workability International Europe Conference and General Meeting in Iceland we hope that our experience will inspire all of you to reach out for what seems impossible and seek strength from the lessons we have learned.

People with disabilities are not a separate section of society. They are an integral part of our nations with the same rights to work, education, health and happiness as everybody else. They are citizens in the classical sense of that word and equal treatment is their inalienable right.

These principles not only serve the interest of people with disabilities. They are a guiding vision for us all and determine the nature of the society we hope to create. By helping people with disabilities we are ultimately transforming ourselves.

There are certainly reforms to be decided, policies to be changed, barriers to be removed.

There is certainly a need to bring together employers and officials, entrepreneurs and investors, directors and shareholders and consolidate their understanding of how involvement by people with disabilities can enrich their companies and inspire their workforce.

There is certainly much that still needs to be done, but the success of what has already been achieved should encourage us to move forward.

It is in this spirit that I welcome all of you to Iceland and salute your contributions to the creation of a new Europe – a continent worthy of the honour to be called a true democracy where the equal rights of all have become an exciting experience.