

## Movimiento Congruencia: Serving the Disabled Mexican Worker<sup>1</sup>

By

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Mexico-based Movimiento Congruencia (MC - <http://congruencia.org.mx/index.asp>) is an alliance between companies, hiring agencies, and other institutions focused on the integration of people with disabilities into the workforce and society. MC began in 2000 with 11 participating companies, and eight years later 51 organizations were taking part. Over 500 disabled people had participated. MC has been extended to Panama and Colombia. Every year MC has an annual meeting in which more companies are integrated to the movement. Yet the population of employed disabled workers had grown slowly and there had not been enough upgrades in member buildings to make them accessible. Its leadership had not lobbied for a bill to reform national or state disability laws to require employment of the disabled and architectural changes to make buildings accessible. It seemed to be stuck at the level of several members hiring the disabled and making buildings more accessible but too many MC members merely spoke about hiring the disabled but didn't follow through.

The leadership of MC wrestled with two dilemmas: one was personal coaching for disabled workers while the other was whether or not to insist that members commit to targets:

1. MC members do not all coach their disabled employees adequately. Rodolfo Efraín Ramírez Cuéllar, discussed below, is an excellent example of success in terms of emotional balance and professional excellence, but not all disabled colleagues are as capable. Due to their disabilities, they have a greater probability of being fired from their companies, or simply not being considered for a promotion. It's essential that a

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<sup>1</sup> Dear reader: If you need additional information regarding Rodolfo Efraín Ramírez Cuéllar's experience please feel free to contact him via email: [rodolfoe75@hotmail.com](mailto:rodolfoe75@hotmail.com).

coaching process should be offered to employees with disabilities so that the possibility of success increases. How can this be accomplished?

2. Initially, MC decided not to push other companies for specific objectives regarding the employment and retention of the disabled or the creation of accessible buildings. Committing to targets may have caused some companies to avoid MC because they may have suffered embarrassment at not having been able to achieve the desired results. MC, founded in 2000, now has years of experience and it knows what works and what doesn't; should it encourage objective targets and help companies achieve them or should it remain welcoming to all companies that want to join regardless of objective commitment to meeting targets?

## MC

MC's website provides extensive information about the organization. It is a private sector network of companies and organizations created to employ the handicapped. Members of MC agree to do the following:

1. participate in MC events and projects,
2. promote the integration of the handicapped into their organizational cultures,
3. incorporate MC principles and practices, share know-how, and
4. expand MC membership to include other companies and organizations.

MC recognizes that the handicapped have useful capabilities and the right to seek employment with companies and organizations that need their talents. Employers need to gradually accommodate the handicapped by creating a physical infrastructure that is handicapped accessible. MC intends to collaborate with the government, academic institutions and non-governmental organizations to achieve its goal of employing the handicapped so that they can add value to society. The intent is that eventually employing the handicapped will become routine and that it will no longer be a special issue.

Each member of MC works from its own perspective to integrate disabled people to the workplace. Disability like other socio-economic problems required multi-sector, multi-disciplinary and multi-component efforts. The universities promoted programs to improve the living and educational conditions of students with disabilities. By making modifications to their facilities and programs, the universities collaborated in educating professionals to enter the workforce. The companies made their facilities and policies accessible in order to promote job opportunities for the disabled. Federal and State government were responsible for the legislative actions needed to implement the aforementioned changes and create incentives to make it attractive from an economical point of view. Finally, the NGOs and other organizations played a key role in society by raising awareness and promoting various initiatives.

MC members are to plan their new facilities so that they are handicapped accessible as well as remodeling existing installations to make them accessible as well. Within their social networks, members are to promote the theme of employment of the handicapped.

Within their supply chain management, MC members are to try to include businesses and workshops that employ the handicapped as well as accommodate them in ways that MC promotes (e.g., buildings that are accessible to the handicapped).

MC's services to handicapped people seeking employment are free of charge. MC also provides a complimentary comprehensive manual that one can download from the website to instruct the handicapped how to make use of the service. Once the handicapped individual is in the database, the only ones with access are registered users searching for a new employee.

The criteria for selection are the same as for any other employee. However, the employer understands that some accommodations are necessary. Accommodations are requested by the prospective employee and discussed with the employer. MC has an accessibility manual for the job candidate and employers.

As a social movement, MC's intentions were noble but the opportunity to assist the disabled was very real and personal for the disabled, as in the case of Rodolfo Efraín Ramírez Cuéllar.

#### Rodolfo's story

He told his story because he had learned important lessons that he wanted to share in the hopes that his contribution could help in the development, inclusion, and integration of people like him that are disabled.

Rodolfo, the elder of two children, was born into a middle class family premature at six and a half months. The lack of oxygen provoked a brain injury. Months later his family noticed that he could not stand, like other children his age. His legs were the worst of his difficulties. His family sought medical solutions that could enable him to be ambulatory. For years he endured futile medical treatment but in 1985 he was admitted into a Shriners' program in Houston. For 11 years he received treatment and 12 surgeries that allowed him to slowly become more independent.

While undergoing treatment he continued studying and going to school with his peers. Upon completing his "bachillerato" (roughly equivalent to a community college associates degree), he entered the Valley Baptist Academy, in Harlingen (Texas), for nine months of English as a Second Language training. The experience of being independent and living away from his parents exposed him to important challenges; he had to care for himself (e.g., laundry, clean my room). This phase made him more independent and helped him grow. After Valley Baptist Academy, he returned to México where he started his university studies to become a public accountant, which proved challenging.

Like all recent graduates, after having completed his internship, his objective was to get a job. But finding a job in a small city proved too complicated because local organizations didn't assist the disabled in finding work. He then became an independent public accountant working with an associate. He learned a great deal over two years and he earned some money. But the local growth opportunities were so limited that he moved, in 2002, with the support of his family to Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, enthusiastically looking for work. Months passed without an interview.

Through the Internet he sent his resume to the executives of various companies and became acquainted with many corporate employees at companies such as Femsa, Cemex, Alfa, Vitro, Banamex, Fundación Teletón, and British American Tobacco, among others. At the end of this year of searching, CEMEX called him in for an interview and he was surprised to see that one of the executives was disabled; he observed, "Seeing a disabled executive at CEMEX kept me from giving up on my search for work." Though the company didn't have a vacant position, CEMEX informed him about an internal program (Programa Congruencia) that promoted the integration of the disabled within CEMEX. The executives invited more companies and they created a network of companies to promote the integration of disabled workers, which became known as MC.

In September 2003, the British American Tobacco Group, which got his information from CEMEX, created a program called "People without Barriers" to hire disabled professionals. The umbrella for this effort was the company's Social Responsibility and Diversity Initiatives. Actions taken included: (1) the elimination of architectural barriers in the building, (2) HR policies that supported the integration of the disabled and (3) what was most important was to create awareness in the personnel about the disabled so as to successfully integrate them as new team members. In March 2004 he started working for British American Tobacco as an analyst in the comptroller's office where he worked until the end of 2007. In 2008 he moved to another company where he served as the northeast administrative chief, with a team that achieved important administrative goals in the regional operation. He also continued to contribute to the integration of disabled personnel. Then in April 2009 he moved to another opportunity, progressing with every move.

Being a part of British American Tobacco allowed him to develop professionally in addition to permitting him to continue contributing to the "People without Barriers" program. In September 2004, 10 founding companies created MC. He had the chance to be a member of the team of representatives from the MC, in which he served for nearly five years and shared many lessons learned.

He observed, "From my arrival in Monterrey, going from interview to interview in various organizations, I found it enriching to see that companies are becoming more concerned about corporate social responsibility. Clients, suppliers, investors, employees, and society in general prefer that companies move beyond financial goals and show concern for society's welfare, including hiring the disabled."

Integrating the disabled also involved Total Access, an initiative to ensure accessibility to the companies' buildings and offices. Older buildings needed to be remodeled with ramps, elevators, and other such architectural changes that facilitated normal access, all costly undertakings.

He mentioned that when he was speaking with an HR manager about his satisfaction with the additional elevator the company had installed, the HR manager stated, "Rodolfo, the building elevator is operational, but when will we activate the heart's elevator?" This comment made him reflect on how sensitized people had become to the theme of integrating the disabled, and how important the disabled feel that they can compete for a vacancy, a promotion or whatever opportunity exists. Yet there was still much more to do to "activate the heart's elevator" of critics and people that failed to believe that disabled employees could compete and contribute.

He reflected,

"Having a job can result in a significant change in one's life; one becomes more self sufficient. It's important for the disabled because living expenses go beyond all the customary expenses and contributions to the family; the disabled pay additional health care costs, special accommodations, and transportation costs. When I began, I remember an interview where the HR representative told me that even though there were elevators, I couldn't be hired because the accountants worked on the second floor and it would be too risky in the event of a fire since I couldn't walk down the stairs. I didn't get that job but in the other companies where I've worked they've created special fire or emergency brigades to assist the disabled in the event of a problem. For me it's been more than just getting a job in that I've been promoted and now I'm an executive. I've learned to travel for work and today the limitations are minimal."

He asserted "The disabled are generally loyal and committed employees that enrich their teams and offices with their support and optimism."

He added,

"It can be very challenging to enter the workplace. The disabled need lots of psychological support to improve their self concepts and self confidence. Mentors' coaching is vital. I thank God for the lessons that my disability has given me and for teaching me that people's ability is greater than their disability. I'm grateful to my family for their unconditional support, to the MC and to CEMEX, for giving me the chance to grow as a professional as well as contribute to MC."

#### MC member follow-through

CEMEX and other leaders within MC wanted to integrate disabled employees into the work force. In Mexico, the census performed in 2000 by INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geográfica e Informática), revealed that nearly two percent of Mexico's population suffers from a disability, translating into almost 1.8 million people. In 1999 CEMEX, through its Programa Congruencia, began attempting to reduce the cultural barriers that limited the integration of disabled people to the workplace. The program was not developed with a

charitable purpose in mind, but was to add value to the participating organizations. Three major fronts of action were defined as vital for the success of the Programa Congruencia:

1. Sensitivity: information and training to enhance awareness related to the topic of disability for the audiences involved
2. Productive opportunities: employment or training for employment opportunities, direct and indirect.
3. Accessibility: consideration of architectural and easy-access-to-facilities issues, regardless of the physical or sensorial condition of a person.

In terms of sensitivity, CEMEX has made a commitment to raise awareness internally and externally. The world of disabled people is unfamiliar to most Mexicans; therefore measures must be taken to facilitate its integration with the rest of the world. Culture and the attitude towards disability often pose a barrier that limits the development of people suffering a disability, more due to ignorance than opposition.

CEMEX provided productive opportunities and a Work Integration Program for Professionals with Disabilities, for professionals with some kind of physical or sensorial limitation. "Labor integration is not only a social cause but one that enriches and develops both the individual and the company he or she is integrated into," (Francisco Garza Zambrano, Presidente CEMEX México, Estados Unidos y Comercio Internacional 2006).

In terms of accessibility, CEMEX offers advice to architects, engineers, and the construction industry in its total accessibility guide and the CEMEX Building Awards. CEMEX also decided to document its experience with Congruencia to share with other enterprises. The key factors included follow:

1. Knowledge of the appropriate legislation was crucial. In Mexico, the appropriate entities are the Secretariat of Labor and Social Security, Mexican Social Security Institute and the Secretariat of the Treasury and Public Credit, this last one involving financial and tax-related issues.
2. Awareness inside the company was crucial since disability in the workplace requires attention from those directly and indirectly involved, the candidate and the organization, as well as others playing key roles in this process, like future co-workers. It also implies the modification of some policies and procedures inside the company.
3. CEMEX had to make reasonable modifications to accommodate certain needs.
4. CEMEX created a multidisciplinary committee to lead Congruencia. The committee members had to inform themselves about disabled workers and how to accommodate their needs within the office. They also had to have the time and commitment to implement the project. The committee had to plan to attain the desired objectives by revising CEMEX's policies and procedures. The members are representatives of Human Resources, Institutional Relations, Marketing, Supply Chain, Legal and Financial.

The goal of Accesibilidad Total (i.e., total accessibility) is to eliminate physical, architectural and educational barriers in public and private buildings. According to the Organización de Libre Acceso (<http://www.libreacceso.org>), roughly 70 percent of the Mexican population

lives in places where there are no services or accessibility for the disabled. This inaccessibility contributes to the unemployment of disabled people in private and public organizations. Lack of access goes beyond the simple entrance to a building; it involves restrooms, doors, parking, signaling and the height of objects.

At the end of 2001, the following institutions started working together to certify buildings that complied with the Accesibilidad Total requirements designed to help the disabled people in Nuevo León, the Mexican state where CEMEX's headquarters are located:

- DIF Nuevo León: Desarrollo Integral de la Familia is a decentralized government organization dedicated to families' welfare
- ITESM, Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, a Mexican university that is ranked as one of the most prominent in Latin America
- Libre Acceso: a not-for-profit organization devoted to the elimination of physical, social and cultural barriers.

CEMEX Mexico modified three buildings to make them accessible. These three buildings are architectural masterpieces designed by famous masters of construction, combining art, design and functionality. The Manual for Total Accessibility received international certification given by the International Commission of Technology and Accessibility of Latin America and the Instituto Uruguayo de Normas Técnicas, an entity recognized by the World Health Organization. Its accessible facilities include:

- Offices in San Antonio ( Mexico City) - 157 employees
- Offices for CX Network ( Monterrey)- 59 CEMEX employees plus employees from Neoris ( IT consulting business created by CEMEX)
- Cement Plant / Monterrey - 282 employees

As part of the measures taken to promote accessibility, CEMEX promoted a special award, "Congruencia en Accesibilidad" to recognize builders and designers where the best-completed pieces every year are recognized.

### Immediate Concerns

How could CEMEX and other MC members modify their coaching to support the incorporation of disabled people to the companies and organizations? Should they insist that MC members commit to concrete goals?