

COVID19 - Black Swan bringing opportunity to Disability on the wings of its adversity.

2020 was going to be a great year for everyone. I remember reading many friends' Facebook comments about how this new decade was going to be groundbreaking - vast opportunities, wealth, health and relationships were all going to flourish.

A Black Swan is an unpredictable or unforeseen event, typically rare and one with extreme consequences and a massive role in historical affairs.

There have been about 10 Black Swan events in my lifetime and I'd like to name them: 1997 Asian financial crisis, 2000 the Dot-com crash, 2001 9/11, 2008 Global financial meltdown, 2009 European sovereign debt crisis, 2010 Fukushima nuclear disaster, 2014 Crude oil crisis, 2015 Black Monday China and 2016 BREXIT.

Certainly the consequences of each have been world-changing, but not equally. One of the events, the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers in New York was of particular interest to me in that, after the event, I had the opportunity to do some research about how many wheelchair users perished and how to potentially survive if you were in the building at the time, why and how?

Many years ago I used to travel to New York to engage with Christopher Reeve (Superman) to establish a relationship with him which was to have, and still has, the benefit for QASA when I was the CEO. At that time, I travelled up and down both of the World Trade Centre buildings and often wondered what would happen if the lift stopped working and I was on the top floor. And I got insight into the emergency evacuation procedures which they used in these buildings. Each wheelchair user when appointed to employment at whatever company in the building, received an Evac chair which is an extremely well designed evacuation chair that could easily be manipulated down a stairwell with one person. The problem was, the chairs were given to each individual and these individuals then stored the Evac chair under their desks, and for the most part, forgetting about them. Subsequently, some wheelchair users moved to a different floor, some wheelchair users moved to the front desk, and over time, nobody knew where these essential chairs were.

On that fateful day, 11 September 2001, quite a number of wheelchair users perished in the Towers, and those that survived were those that managed to locate their Evac devices and were assisted down. One person I recall from the 69th floor. As a result of this Black Swan event, regulations regarding the placement of evacuation chairs was adjusted and promulgated. These chairs would now be placed in a designated holding area, on each floor. You will see these in many of our buildings here. So, positive change and outcome for wheelchair users as a result of this tragedy.

Another opportunity that came out of the 9/11 event was quite interesting. I also had an opportunity to get to know the details of 1Time airline, a low-cost airline founded by Glen Orsman, former head of Comair, and some friends, which they started as a result of aircraft being sold off for peanuts in the USA. They purchased an aircraft for next to nothing and started Jhb to Cpt routes with one aircraft. The cost per seat to run this route was significantly reduced as a result of the cheap first purchase.

QASA negotiated with the airline CEO Glenn to receive a 5% share in the business but sadly this didn't materialise in the end. 1Time and a wonderful business strategy with 4 revenue

streams in it - selling of seats on a flight, the advertising in the in-flight magazine, servicing and washing of aircraft, and of course, the sales of refreshments during the flight.

QASA was always on the lookout for equity deals under my leadership, and in hindsight, thank goodness we didn't invest, as unfortunately, this very profitable airline saw its demise after a BBBEE deal dispute.

As things stand, we know that airlines will have to develop a whole new strategy to survive current circumstances!

A Black Swan event can create some incredible opportunities. It can change everything, from the economy of an individual to the economy of a country to the economy of the world. This is what we are witnessing with this Corona Virus pandemic. I want to wish South Africa strength in this time. I want to wish my friends and family good health. Stick to the regulations of the day. I want to wish my fellow people with disabilities who are particularly vulnerable, that if diagnosed with COVID19, I wish you lots of strength and fortitude in this time.

Please avoid contracting as much as you can. I fear that various Provincial DoH will categorise us as high-risk and we will be at the end of the queue for ventilators if selections need to be made. The situation will be ruthless. Rather let's socially distance ourselves, and stay at home, safe, for a long while. This is not going to be over very soon at all. And this is where the opportunity arises.

Hear me out on this. In particular, wheelchair users as a constituency in the disability sector. To be honest, our mobility is always dependent on us having access to door-to-door, with very little accessible public transport. Many employers have battled and grappled with finding a place for us in the workplace. Our accessibility has been restricted by the lack of accessibility of the built environment, and infrastructure, either by poor design of the building or by the ignorance of the landlord, or the stubbornness of the developer or an unwilling architect failing to embrace Universal Design. The structural barrier seems to have given them adequate reason for not employing us as a viable disability cohort, no matter what our skills are. Yes, we can fight and we can advocate and we can throw the book of legislation at the potential or present employer, and we can sue and we can class action and we can toyi-toyi, but at the end of the day very few victories have been attained by the actions mentioned. This is the sad reality.

The Corona Virus pandemic has changed the face of the working world. These changes are to our advantage. We must be ready and embrace this change and take the opportunities it has created. Working from home has been legitimized as a workable viable option overnight!

Let's package our skills and concede to inaccessible environments for the moment, and use this as an opportunity to show employers that we are the best constituency for "working from home" jobs.

Pivot your choice of skills and knowledge to "working from home" subjects and careers. We have the opportunity, for the moment, to bypass the age old barriers to entry into the workplace of inaccessible buildings and transport. Let us enhance our IT skills and knowledge in readiness to work from home. Now is the time to promote our viability through the BBBEE legislation environment. And guess what? We may be the best choice for those jobs reassigned to the home environment. To put it crassly, employers will have the best of both worlds in this instance... they neither have to see us or accommodate us,

yet they will get the benefit of their Employment Equity box ticked and we get employment. We are comfortable in our homes. Our caregivers, if we have, remain available and close by us, yet out of sight of our Zoom profile. Let this Black Swan be our journey into the workplace. So be it from home.

Ari Seirlis is the former CEO of the QuadPara Association of South Africa and presently serves on the Presidential Working Group on Disability advising the President on disability matters and strategy.