

MOTIVATION FOR LIFELONG LEARNING IN SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Although in Europe employment inclusion is an important objective there is no common standardised scheme. The focus is modern rehabilitation, a range of services and processes designed to enable all disabled people to live their lives as fully as possible. For organizations, SMEs and professionals the project provides an opportunity to introduce/train innovative employment inclusion and rehabilitation approaches for people with disabilities.

Key words: lifelong learning, people with disabilities, SMEs

Although in Europe employment inclusion is an important objective there is no common standardized scheme. The two-year project Uemploy addresses the gap. The focus is modern rehabilitation, a range of services and processes designed to enable all disabled people to live their lives as fully as possible. For organizations, SMEs and professionals the project provides an opportunity to introduce/train innovative employment inclusion and rehabilitation approaches for people with disabilities. Despite the progress made by the EU over the past decade towards inclusive employment, the employment rate among the disabled in many European countries remains very low. Very often people with disabilities still find themselves excluded from work which can support their independent living and enable them to contribute to the community.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The UEmploy project

The focus of the UEmploy project is modern rehabilitation, a range of services and processes designed to enable all disabled people to live their lives as fully as possible. For organizations, SMEs and professionals the project provides an opportunity to introduce/train innovative employment inclusions an rehabilitation approaches for people with disabilities. The project develops methods/professional supports in EN and partners' languages to help SMEs employ people with disabilities/e-learning modules for SMEs to motivate them hire persons with disabilities. The

project develops an European model of best practices.

For SMEs the project provides an opportunity to introduce and train rehabilitation approaches for disabled people; acquirement of new competences, knowledge on EU consultancy employment inclusion; an opportunity to share experiences and ideas on the topic through an international network; awareness about the project developments at local and EU level with the view to mainstreaming disability and employment issues.

For disabled the project will facilitate greater involvement in their organizations' strategic planning; improve independence, self-confidence, accountability, flexibility and sociability; improve employment inclusion and ensure full equality in employment practices; gain positive experiences from the process; receive better services from service providers.

To achieve the UEmploy objective the partners will: carry out a state of the practice research to identify the legal provisions, services offered, experiences and best inclusive practices with regard to employment of people with disabilities, develop consultancy instruments (checklists and tools to describe job-specific competencies, support job matching process, identify potential problems, analyse environmental obstacles and provide recommendations for employers), train consultants, pilot consultancy process, develop a consultancy network and make arrangements for continuous training of consultants, launch an awareness campaign to promote the importance of inclusive employment

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and the valuable contribution people with disabilities can make, forge links with business and social agencies to ensure sustainability of the consultancy services.

At this stage the partnership has finished the national and the European research. In the content of this article we will present the main findings from Romania and some important ideas from the other countries of the partnership: Hungary, Finland, Ireland and Bulgaria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results from Romania

In Romania, the changes after 1990 led to major social changes related to the transition to a market economy. The period of transition from the centralized economy to the market economy led to a dramatic drop in living standards for most of the social categories. The groups of population that were most affected were those that were in risky situations, groups that can be classified among the "losers of transition". Joint Inclusion Memorandum states as disadvantaged groups the following: Roma, disabled and young people who are preparing to leave the child protection system.

Although the situation of person with disabilities has improved in recent years, there are still many problems due to the difficulty of building a system of protection for this category. Lack of enough specialists in the social field (social workers, psychologists) makes it difficult to fully assess the situation of these persons and, consequently, blocks the consistent application of law no.448/2006, republished in 2008.

Decrease in sheltered employment has mainly affected people with disabilities. The legal framework adopted in 2006 aims to correct these errors and contains provisions to encourage the participation of persons with disabilities in the labor market. But now it appears that this provision did not succeed. According to law no. 448/2006, republished in 2008, an employer, whether public or private, fulfills its social obligations towards persons with disabilities choosing one of the following:

Whether employing a total of 4% of the employees, if their number exceeds 50.

Whether it pays each month an amount to the state budget representing 50% of the national gross minimum wage multiplied by the number of spaces in which it has not hired people with disabilities.

Whether buying products or services from authorized protected units, their amount being identical to the taxes described in the preceding paragraph.

The total number of persons with disabilities that were in the records of the National Authority for Persons with Disabilities on 31st of December 2010 was 689 680.

A notable fact is that the investments in accessibility refer strictly to the physical accessibility of facilities for people with locomotor disabilities (ramps, platforms etc.) Currently, other forms of accessibility are ignored or are very rare – we refer to accessibility for people with sensory disabilities or other more subtle forms of accessibility, such as those for people with mental disabilities.

The current legislative context is not an encouraging one, but rather a punitive type of "tax because you have not hired disabled persons". A positive context that rewards employment could be a much better framework to support employers.

Encouraging the employment of people with disabilities should start at an institutional level.

Although the situation of persons with disabilities has improved in recent years, there are still many problems due to the difficulty of building a protection system for this particular category. There is still no national social protection system able to counteract the economic effects on the population, particularly for the disabled.

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Placing Centers provide information on the number of unemployed, but they do not have specialized service and support for companies. They can't provide help on how to deal with employees with disabilities, or how to employ more people with disabilities and not to diminish the profit and profitability of the company.

A problematic issue is related to the special education system for persons with disabilities (particularly those with disabilities from birth or occurring in early childhood). The absence of policies that can foster integration and interaction with the community members contributes, to a large extent, to the difficulties that these people encounter when looking for a job in the free labor market.

Becoming more apparent is the need for specialized centers to promote employment for people with disabilities who can build a bridge between the needs of beneficiaries and the labor market.

The focus is modern rehabilitation, a range of services and processes designed to enable all

disabled people to live their lives as fully as possible. For organizations, SMEs and professionals it is necessary to provide an opportunity to introduce/train innovative employment inclusion and rehabilitation approaches for people with disabilities. Best practice examples are rare and should be multiplied: the centre for the integration through work of people with disabilities from Harlau is a model to follow.

The primary considerations that can be drawn from the research carried out (although indicative in nature, not representative) draw attention to important issues for future communication and collaborative work with employers:

First, there is an increased need to inform companies about the potential of people with disabilities and to get more information about how they could be helped to maintain employment (information seems to be more important than some cost facilities).

Another focal point is a lack of legislative support. The provisions of law no. 448/2006 seem to be insufficient, and this is a good opportunity for further investigation.

A surprising thing refers to the characteristics of persons with disabilities. The respondents invoke the dangerousness (stereotype attached to certain categories of persons with disabilities) and the lack of skills as barriers in employment. Also, the lack of interest of the disabled in this field contributes, in the view of the respondents, to the maintenance of the status-quo.

General social attitude, reflected in the social attitude of the working staff, is for those who answered the questionnaire, a factor that maintains a low level of employment of disabled persons.

Results from Hungary

The current system in Hungary uses several tools to encourage the employment of disabled people. A quota system is in place. Organizations employing more than twenty people (including the budget financed and non-profit organizations) have an obligatory quota that at least 5 per cent of staff should be disabled. If this quota is not met, the employer must pay a specified amount to the Labour Market Fund, to be used in turn for rehabilitation purposes. Companies employing less than 20 persons may receive tax benefits if they employ people with disabilities. If organizations employ disabled people above the specified quotas, they can receive wage subsidies.

In 2010, in addition to the new constitution, politicians decided to reform the social system.

Two major problems were identified: The number of people receiving the rehabilitation pension was exceptionally (about 800.000 people) and the employment rate of disabled people was too low (less than 5%). The reforms will be announced and implemented in 2011.

Results from Ireland

Historically, people with disabilities in Ireland have experienced segregation in schooling, vocational education, training and in the terms under which they benefit from and access welfare. In recent years there has been a policy shift towards mainstreaming education, training and employment for people with disabilities. The Irish government has now begun to prioritize the issue of disability in government policy. The new policy content concentrates on enhancing two mutually supporting areas; disability specific services and access for disabled people to mainstream services. Disability has increasingly been linked to wider equality perspectives: disability is one of the nine designated areas under the Employment Equality Act (2005).

Results from Bulgaria

For many decades right up to the middle of the 1990s, Bulgaria was dominated by medical models of disability. The very definition of disability in Bulgaria up to today is explicitly medical – disability status is given as “percentage of lost labour capacity”, on the basis of medical diagnosis alone. There is no assessment with reference to the wider social, psychological or economic environment.

The Employment Promotion Act forbids “...direct or indirect discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, age, gender, religion, political or trade unions affiliation, social and family status, physical or mental disabilities.”

Employment services for people with disabilities are only now emerging. They present a very topical issue on the agenda of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. Providing employment mediation and consultancy is among the measures in the Long-term Strategy for Employment of People with Disabilities for 2011 - 2020 adopted by the Council of Ministers.

Results from Finland

In Finland access of disabled people to employment is significantly more difficult than for their able-bodied peers. According to different studies, however, disabled people and those with partial ability to work constitute a significant labour reserve, which has remained largely unexploited. This is due to employers' attitudes -

but also social policies, as a consequence of which many disabled people end up in retirement instead of working according to their ability to work. Increased participation in working life is now a political issue.

Current government programmes have adopted employment of disabled individuals as a goal to be achieved by means of mainstreaming principles. So far, these actions have produced few real employment results.

CONCLUSIONS

The general findings and conclusions from the national reports demonstrate some significant similarities. These relate to patterns in the official understanding of disability and the critical legacies of often centuries of negative attitudes to the experience of disability. The perceptions of mainstream societies in most countries towards disability – and especially the potential of people with disabilities to secure and hold jobs in the open labour market on equal terms with non-disabled workers – are frequently negative and often prejudicial.

These attitudes are not removed in a few years. They underline powerfully the reasons why official responses in most countries to disability have been ones of tokenism at best or long term institutionalization at worst. The experience of institutionalization deeply affects both individuals and their families in mostly negative ways. Institutionalization also serves to reinforce negative, fearful or patronizing opinions and attitudes in mainstream society and communities.

Expectations remain low about the ability of disabled citizens to compete on an equal footing.

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