

BAIA MARE EMPLOYER ATTITUDES TOWARDS HIRING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES - CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The employment rate of people with disabilities depends on the way they are regarded by society and is limited by the lack of a vocational training tailored to job requirements and personal skills, by the lack of job skills assessment, the lack of customized jobs, the employers' distrust of a disabled individual's skills and abilities, the lack of economic incentives, and by a general ignorance of the disability issue. The personal attitudes of private and public employers is the concern of the project implemented by ASSOC Baia Mare, a study of these attitudes providing us with information regarding the methodology to be used when hiring people with disabilities.

Key words: *assessment of people with disabilities, social economy, employers of people with disabilities*

The goal of our society today to support people with disabilities through active measures showcasing their abilities and determining employers and people in general to change their outlook on this category of persons is what made us develop and implement a project whose results we hope will add to the efforts towards eliminating the persisting stigma faced by these persons, a project that feeds into Romania's social economy mechanism.

The project called "Integrated social services and vocational training for people with disabilities", co-funded by the European Social Fund through the 2007–2013 Development of Human Resources Sectorial Operational Program, Priority axis 6: Promoting social inclusion, Major

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area of intervention 6.2. „Improving the access and participation of vulnerable groups to the labor market” and implemented by ASSOC Baia Mare Association in partnership with Phoenix Speranța Association from Mediaș, the Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection and Adapt Ability from Holland, aims to: „Increase the access of people with disabilities to the labor market by creating a scientifically-based formal framework of ASSESSMENT, MOTIVATION, CERTIFICATION AND ACCESSIBILITY”. The project is designed to develop and implement a tailored model for assessing the disabled person’s residual functional capacity (the capacity to work) and to facilitate the training, certification and employment of people with disabilities (whether physical, mental, neuromotor etc.).

The project’s specific goals include:

a) To develop a tool for evaluating the residual functional capacity and work capacity and calibrate it to the population of disabled people in Romania and to develop and implement a model for the functional assessment of people with disabilities (ASSESSMENT).

b) To create and tailor/ transfer programs of counseling and training, active support and individual aid to increase motivation towards professional and personal development (MOTIVATION).

c) To train the specialists who will provide the vocational counseling and career guidance of people with disabilities (CERTIFICATION).

d) To facilitate a social dialogue between companies and NGOs with regard to accepting and hiring people with disabilities, followed by proposals for local and national employment policies (ACCESSIBILITY).

e) To draft/ update the regulatory framework pertaining to the application norms governing the activity of those specializing in counseling, guidance and training of people with disabilities.

In the following, I would like to talk about the experience of our project experts with regard to employer attitudes towards hiring people with disabilities.

The study included 10 employers who were willing to participate in an interview conducted with the purpose of finding out how a potential employer feels about hiring people with disabilities.

The experts' study was based on the following theory: social psychology research and our experience in the project shows that the chances for a person with disabilities to get a job are higher when the manager takes part in the job interview.

The more the manager engages in professional contacts with people with disabilities, the better the latter are regarded. Studies and our experience in the project shows that the idea according to which „if you have a family member or close friend who is a person with disabilities, you will be more understanding of or will empathize with such a person at your workplace” is not true, managers drawing a clear line between personal and professional life.

Managers with higher education tend to perceive people with disabilities as a homogeneous group about which they hold strong stereotypes.

Social psychology studies conclude that disabilities are generally perceived negatively, which is a major barrier to employment and integration in a work group. Stereotypes can hold disabled persons back from integrating in the work group because they are afraid they might confirm the stereotype others have about them. The extent to which we participate in the community life is relevant as to how we value equal opportunities.

Openness to cooperating with NGOs would increase the chances for an unbiased assessment of a disabled person's working skills. People with disabilities are part of a vulnerable group and they need support and mediation services to find their place on the labor market.

The first employer who was interviewed showed an open, unprejudiced attitude towards hiring people with disabilities, as well as people belonging to other vulnerable groups. The employer would hire a disabled person if that person met the job requirements. At present,

the interviewee has no employees with disabilities, is aware of the incentives provided by the law but does not find them fully convincing.

The second employer suggested enlisting the support of recruitment agencies as a way to increase the disabled persons' chances of finding a job, there's a benefit in using the recruitment agencies' already established connections with companies which have vacancies, and a referral from these agencies to the companies seeking to hire would carry more weight.

The third employer showed a slight reluctance to participate in the interview and has no intention of supporting the concept of social responsibility. He does not have any employees with disabilities and believes such a person would not be able to face the challenges of a job in his company, but would be willing to accept a person whose disabilities were not psychological or intellectual. He would try to hire a person with disabilities only if he received specialized support. He is aware of the incentives provided by the law but doesn't find them convincing enough. Overall, the employer showed a discriminatory attitude.

The fourth employer had a non-discriminatory attitude. He already has an employee with disabilities and is open to hiring a disabled person if he/she met the job requirements, but has some reservations about people with mental disabilities. He sees the value of specialized support when hiring a person with disabilities and believes awareness-raising campaigns are important.

The fifth employer showed an open, positive, unbiased attitude towards hiring disabled persons, due to experience in working with people with mental, physical disabilities and somatic disorders, but the experience was often not a good one. The employer is concerned about the risks associated with hiring a person with disabilities, but would hire a disabled person if that person had the required job knowledge. Currently, 2 people with disabilities work with this employer who nevertheless believes that the subsidies provided by the state for employers who hire disabled people are very low.

The sixth employer has no employees with disabilities, though the company received a job application from a blind person but rejected it on the grounds that accommodation for the person would have been too costly. The employer values social responsibility and participation, recommending a strategy that includes the organization of various events addressed to employers enabling dialogue and exchange of success stories about people with disabilities who, once hired upon the referral of ASSOC, were able to rise up to the challenge. The employer also recommended an awareness raising strategy targeting employers.

The seventh employer showed an open, positive, unprejudiced attitude towards hiring people with disabilities and willingness to hire a disabled person if that person had the necessary skills for the job. Due to one of the manager's personal experience with disability, the attitude was more open and positive. The employer believes an employee with disabilities can be an asset, a plus for the corporate image. Information is very important, therefore it would be useful to have more information campaigns. The employer acknowledges the effectiveness of specialized support, especially with post-employment monitoring.

The eighth employer showed an open attitude, though there was more inclination towards pursuing profit rather than social responsibility. A person with severe physical or mental disability would not be considered for employment on the grounds that such persons would not fit his company's profile, therefore they would not stand any chance to be hired. The manager would have the same expectations of a person with disabilities as of any other employee and would be willing to make the necessary accommodations at the workplace if the disabled person were considered job worthy.

The ninth employer suggested short customized letters be sent to employers to raise awareness with regard to hiring people with disabilities. His company has no employees with disabilities. The idea of hiring a disabled person is not excluded as long as that person meets the job requirements. The manager agreed in principle to the idea of hiring people with disabilities, provided that the recruiting and

selection process is conducted in a responsible manner and in accordance with the terms of reference. The employer would hire people with disabilities if the referral came from NGOs.

The last employer showed an open, positive, unprejudiced attitude towards hiring people with disabilities and willingness to hire a disabled person if that person met the job requirements, as well as to make the necessary accommodations at the workplace, if required. The employer believes an employee with disabilities can be an asset, a plus for the corporate image, but also believes that due to the general view that people with disabilities are not as productive as people without disabilities, other managers will find it hard to agree to employ people from this vulnerable group. Specialized support in hiring these people is deemed highly significant, especially in post-employment monitoring.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that of the 10 employers, 6 would hire a person with disabilities if the person met the job requirements; 2 would not hire people with severe physical or mental disabilities; 2 did not express a clear opinion, but recommended partnering with recruitment agencies to facilitate disabled people's access to employment or organizing employer awareness-raising campaigns. Most of the interviewed employers stated that they were aware of the legislation regarding the employment of people with disabilities, but perceived the economic incentives provided by the state as being too low. Most of them showed a positive, open and non-discriminatory attitude.

Conclusions

The disabled people's social integration and access to employment is about changing attitudes and practices on the part of individuals, institutions and organizations in such a way as to enable an equal contribution and participation to the community life and culture of all people, including those perceived as „different” due to disabilities, ethnical background, social and economic living standards.

Thus, in order to change employers' behavior towards hiring people with disabilities, one needs to change the way they think about it. Literature review shows that employers' attitudes are more favorable when they have previous work experience with people with disabilities and are well informed about the issue itself and the regulatory framework governing it. Hence, suggested solutions for modifying employers' awareness include conducting information campaigns regarding the limitations and capacities of people with disabilities and organizing internships in companies allowing employers to see for themselves that people with disabilities don't necessarily entail a poor job performance and can actually prove to be an asset to the company. Also, individual discussions with employers can be a way to change their beliefs.

Social psychology studies outline several ways to change attitudes and behaviors. Robert B. Cialdini (1984/2004) formulated six basic categories, each governed by a fundamental psychological principle that drives human behavior. The six principles of persuasion are: reciprocity, commitment/consistency, social proof, authority, liking and scarcity. People's attitudes and behaviors can be influenced on the basis of these principles.

So, another way to change employers' attitudes towards hiring people with disabilities is resorting to these six principles. For instance, a person with authority in the presence of employers has more influence over their attitudes than a person without authority.

Although our studies report that most employers claim they are willing to hire people with disabilities, the actual hiring practices say differently, the employment rate of people with disabilities being very low. For this reason, in order to change employers' beliefs and behavior towards hiring people with disabilities, the state and the organizations advocating for people with disabilities need to boost their efforts.

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