

Decent Work

Promising practices in the Employment of People with Disabilities
from Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, and Finland



Editors:

Anna Idström, Marko Stenroos and Minna Uimonen

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Introduction

Anna Idström ja Marko Stenroos

■ ■ ■ **About employment for people with disabilities: Success stories and challenges**

”The unemployment figures of disabled people are high compared to the population in general, and it is not easy for a disabled applicant to get a job...”

Statements like the quote above are common when the poor employment situation of disabled people is discussed, and there is some truth to such claims. There are challenges involved in improving the employment figures of disabled people, but finding the way to the open job market, and even to enjoying normal paid employment, is not impossible. In this book, we have wanted to focus on stories of people successfully finding employment. We have wanted to describe how individual people in Sweden, Denmark, Estonia and Finland have become employed. The book is meant to be an inspiring example for people with disabilities, for people working on the employment issues of people with disabilities or reduced ability to work, and for officials whose work touches upon these issues. In the last section of this Introduction we describe how the material has been collected. For now, we just wish to note that that the book consists of real life stories and views from professionals in this field.

In their contribution to this book, Kaarina Latostenmaa and Nina Aarola present the *Employer Counselling*. They have focused on the employer’s viewpoint, instead of the disabled person’s competences. Broadening the view, from the disabled person’s abilities towards the employer’s perspective, is a natural part of a process whereby the employment prospects of a disabled person are improved. This does not mean that measures to improve disabled people’s competences are not needed – quite the opposite. However, this approach does partly reflect the fact that models to improve competences have been developed for several decades, and a point has been reached where we need a broader perspective. We need to consider common attitudes in

society, as well as the roles of the parents of disabled children, so that they can have the tools to teach their children to become active members of society, starting as early as in pre-adolescence. Lars Ahlenius from Sweden and Milla Ilonen from Finland emphasize that a disabled child should not be raised wrapped in cotton wool, but should be taught the basics of participation from early on. Through this process, the (professional) identity of a participating adult will also start to develop. Astangu and Estonian Agrenska Fondi, functioning in Estonia, have while working with job coaching paid attention to the children's and adolescents' immediate social circle, in an attempt to ensure that the person can move on into working life with strong support.

The bodies that provide funding for various projects and interventions to support the employment of disabled people have also started to pay more attention to the applicability of employment models. Currently, as new models to support employment are developed, emphasis is placed on establishing the model and disseminating it to the existing service structures. This is done particularly because good models developed in the past may have ended up benefitting the developer organization only. This process of disseminating and establishing models is something that this book also aims to promote.

Employing disabled people in the open job market does involve challenges. It is a like puzzle for which every piece must fall into place. The disabled person's competences must be such that a reciprocal exchange between employer and employee is possible; the worker gets paid and the employer gets a useful work performance. Societal structures and various support forms must likewise be adequate, and they must promote disabled people's employment. These are necessary when the issue is reduced ability to work¹, or when special interventions are needed to create the conditions for the disabled person's work, such as providing unhindered access to the workstation. The coworkers' attitudes must likewise be appropriate, as a disabled colleague may sometimes cause confusion or even fear. However, diversity in the workplace community is a factor that benefits both the community and the employer, and improves the atmosphere. Thus, we are talking about attitude changes in disabled people as well as their families and the entire

¹ Defining the term 'reduced ability to work' is challenging. The term has been coined in order to replace an earlier term with something less negatively labelling. A disabled person may, however, be fully able to perform the tasks involved in his or her job.

society. These factors affect the formation of successful paths to employment described in this book.

■ ■ ■ **What have we learned?**

This book is about being successful. Experts with a thorough understanding of the employment issues of disabled people share their views on cases in which disabled people have successfully been employed. The successes have been built from a number of very different starting points, and the articles highlight a broad variety of means to promote success. However, the cases do possess some common features which we will discuss next. In addition to covering four countries, this collection handles a number of different disability groups: people with mobility impairments resulting from a trauma or a congenital cause, people with developmental disabilities, people on the autism spectrum, people recovering from mental health problems, people with brain injuries, and people with visual or hearing impairments. The common factors appear to be, firstly, that everyone needs to have her/his work tailored individually – at least in the beginning – and, secondly, that the right person needs to be connected with the right job, like fitting a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. Namely, many disabled people are very good at the jobs they are able to do – reduced ability to work only concerns certain tasks. This makes it doubly profitable to endorse efforts to find employment for disabled people. What works for these groups of people may in the future help also other people who are more difficult to employ than average: single mothers, caregivers of family members, people suffering from migraine or other illnesses that constrain their lives, and others with functional impairments. There are numerous people who do not fit the norm, and they all share the desire to work.

■ ■ ■ **Which factors can help a disabled person to find employment?**

I. Families and support networks

Family members and other people who are central in a disabled person's life have a major influence on the disabled person's employment prospects. Like

any other person, the disabled person becomes oriented towards a certain kind of life from childhood. This may mean becoming orientated towards building a career and prioritizing success in one's own life, or it may mean becoming orientated towards passively spending time in day activities directed for people with disabilities. Or perhaps the childhood orientation will lead towards becoming displaced from all social activity, feeling incapable of participating or even of looking elsewhere for things that could make life meaningful. It is utterly crucial that parents encourage the disabled person to strive forward in life, to the limit of her or his potential. From this grows the correct attitude towards job seeking. In Estonia, this has been realized with great clarity. The Astangu training center forms a network around the disabled student, consisting of family members and friends as well as employment and social officials. Similarly, family is the starting point for the work of the Estonian Agrenska Fond. Considering the historical development of Estonia on the disability employment front, the country has the opportunity to skip the "work center model" that long reigned in Finland as well as other Nordic countries. At the same time, the Estonians could pay attention to both improving the living conditions for disabled people in ordinary residential buildings and setting goals for employment in the open job market. Along the same lines, Lars Ahlenius from Sweden says: "The parents of a young disabled person do a disservice to their children by pampering them. Instead of being spoiled, the young people should be shown what they can attain, and they should be offered realistic goals and expectations."

2. The cultural context

Cultural, historical and social contexts affect disabled people's employment prospects. Comparisons have shown that a solution that works extremely well locally may not get off the ground elsewhere. The reasons may lie in the cultural or historical context. At the same time, this different environment may have created a fruitful ground for completely different realizations, which people elsewhere can learn from, in turn.

In Denmark, many flourishing businesses have been founded and are owned by disabled people, as well as social enterprises founded by associations that employ disabled people. Why does entrepreneurship not work in the same way for disabled people in, for example, Estonia? Leonora Kraus discusses this question, claiming that there is a certain backwardness in the Estonian

attitude climate and that the legislation also limits opportunities. On the other hand, Kraus mentions examples that suggest the opposite, such as the woodcraft business *Sakadak*: a mobility impaired man armed with the necessary perseverance runs the business, employing several disabled people. Lenora Kraus also draws attention to team work within the body that employs disabled people, and above all, good leadership: a good leader can make the organization function and generate profit even when the circumstances are difficult, but in the hands of a less talented leader, investments are drained away and as the difficult times come, the business ends. Although the Danish type of social entrepreneurship has so far not been successful in Estonia, apart from a few exceptions, the Estonian cultural context has generated a different kind of wisdom: the significance of the family has been understood more clearly than elsewhere, and this understanding leads to solutions that bring jobs to disabled people.

3. Getting employed is a multiphase process for the long-term unemployed

Kirsi Koskimäki, Sirpa Paukkeri-Reyes and Lars Ahlenius, whose discussion focuses on people recovering from mental health problems and others who have been outside working life for long periods, highlight the gradual nature of the process of returning to work. Becoming orientated and building self-confidence can be lengthy processes which the person who has suffered serious adversity has to go through before he or she is ready to take full responsibility for a job. A trial period often makes the return to working life smoother. The same seems to apply to job seekers with severe disabilities. An Estonian example of this process is the case of a cleaner with a developmental disability who got employed at the department of genetics at Tartu University. With the help of the Agrenska Fond, this person went through several work trial periods during which the demands were gradually raised. The case is described by Krislin Padjus. As Kirsi Koskimäki also observes, it is important to take small steps in the right direction.

4. Encouraging employers to hire disabled people – providing new knowledge

The projects *Sisäänheitto työelämään!* (“Leap to Labour!”) by *Lihastautiliitto* (The Finnish Neuromuscular Disorders Association), *Työnantajan palvelu-*

ohjaus (“Employer Counselling”) by Satakunta University of Applied Sciences and *Se kraften!* (“See the Potential!”) by the Swedish employment authorities represent a variety of ways to influence employers. There are other similar initiatives that, however, fall outside the scope of this book. For example, the joint project of several disability associations, *Reilu Rekrytointi* (“Fair Recruiting”), administered by *Lihastautiliitto*, promotes the employment of disabled people. In this project disability organizations, actors in the public sector, businesses and jobseekers combine their efforts to break down prejudices. The project’s website² portrays job applications by disabled people in an incredibly stylish video format. A shared feature in these approaches is networking with businesses that are interested in the socially responsible business practice, and publicity campaigns aiming for broader awareness, with the intention of influencing attitudes and gradually changing the culture.

Based on her experiences, Liisa-Maija Verainen observes that important factors in convincing an employer include the employer and the job seeker meeting face-to-face, and providing the employer with correct information. The process of breaking down prejudices creates the conditions for negotiating the work contract.

The book chapter describing Sebastian, a young man working at the McDonald’s in Frederiksberg, Denmark, offers important insights about the employer’s power and responsibility in employing disabled people. McDonald’s has formed a policy, at the organizational level, regarding employing disabled people and people generally regarded as different, in other words, regarding the promotion of diversity in the workplace. Because this decision has been made at the managerial level, a certain Sebastian from Copenhagen got a real job. This is not a small matter. For Sebastian, it affects his entire life and identity. It also affects the lives of Sebastian’s nearest and dearest, and the clients who receive good, cheerful service from Sebastian at the restaurant. There is no way to proceed except step by step, one experience at a time, towards good working life.

A Finnish example of this is the joint project by The Finnish Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and *K-kauppiaслиitto* (The Union of K-chain grocery stores), *Monenlaisia tuloksetekijöitä* (“Many kinds of

² www.reilurekrytointi.fi

productive people”³). In the course of this project, thirteen people with developmental disabilities have been employed at K-chain grocery stores over the past few years. The goals of the project include finding more jobs for people with developmental disabilities as well as providing a good example for other businesses.

5. Diversity benefits the workplace community

The expression ‘diversity in working life’⁴ is on many people’s lips these days. At workplaces, it has been noticed that diversity among the staff increases well-being at work and a sense of being comfortable in the workplace, and that through these effects, diversity also influences productivity. This trend is touched upon in several articles in this book. Annika Borbye and Liisa-Maija Verainen, among others, express their views on this subject.

6. Disability organizations

In the Finnish language version of this book, Tuula Vuolle-Selkki considers the founding of disability organizations to represent historically significant steps forward. The same history is reflected in articles that shed light on current employment issues: for example, the joint force and know-how of *Lihastautiliitto* (The Finnish Neuromuscular Disorders Association), *Mielenterveyden keskusliitto* (The Finnish central association of mental health) and *Handikappförbunden* (The Swedish Disability Federation) form a background to several of the success stories described in this book. In Denmark, the businesses owned by disabled people, for example *Huset Venture* described in this book by Mikael Hasle and Inger Steen Moeller, tell their own story of how by joining together people can attain goals that would be impossible for a single person alone. Only the strategy is different – social enterprises provide, in the Danish cultural context, a financially viable and ethically sustainable form of work.

³ www.kehitysvammaliitto.fi/suomeksi/kehittaminen/monenlaisia-tuloksetkijoita

⁴ The Finnish Ministry for Employment and the Economy has recently published a guidebook that handles this issue, titled “Monimuotoisuus – työelämän mahdollisuus” (“Diversity – an opportunity for working life”). This guidebook can be accessed on the Ministry’s website, at www.tem.fi/?s=4210

7. Social entrepreneurship

Social enterprises owned by disabled people that operate on a commercial basis are today's reality in Denmark, and in Estonia there are attempts in the same direction. In Sweden, companies owned by municipalities are important employers of disabled people. In Finland this type of development has been relatively slow, but at the same time, visually impaired massage therapists and physiotherapists have long had their own business, *Aktivo*⁵, and one of the experiential experts portrayed in this book, Heta Pukki, likewise has her own business⁶. What makes the Danish society conducive to business, while in Finland and Estonia such activity seems to develop quite sluggishly? Answering this question would require a research project in itself.

■ ■ ■ Why Decent Work?

Finland's Disability Policy Programme, VAMPO 2010-2015, drawn by the Finnish Social and Health Ministry, has been given the title "A Strong Basis for Inclusion and Equality". Being part of working life and getting paid for work is inclusion and equality par excellence. Therefore, we find it important that the cases portrayed in this book shed light on instances in which employing a disabled person has been successful and has become financially viable. We feel that employment is not only a question of inclusion and equality, but also one of fairness.

The various forms of rehabilitative work centers are not covered in this book. We understand that such centers serve a purpose in the lives of some disabled people, but we consider it an important goal and a matter of principle that people should be paid for the work they do. By tailoring jobs and by utilizing different models of supported employment it is possible for disabled people to move from sheltered workshops to paid employment, gain better economic status, and attain greater inclusion in different sectors of society. From the employer's perspective, this is about "tapping fresh talent"⁷ or "seeing the potential".

5 www.aktivofysio.fi

6 www.autspect.fi/business.htm

7 www.vates.fi/kyvytkayttoon

We hope that this book will provoke thoughts. Although a central theme of the book are the different employment models, it is important to remember that a person should always be treated as an individual. None of the models can be applied directly as such, and our intention is to offer a variety of accounts to show how people might act and find different solutions in different situations.

This book was created with the help of European Social Fund project funding. Project administration was handled by ASPA Housing Services Foundation. The project *Face2Face – Action for Employment* was launched in March 2012, and continued until the end of June 2013. Collecting employment models took place in workshops arranged in Finland, Denmark and Estonia. In Sweden we found partners at workshops organized by local actors. Coordinators from all these countries have done voluntary work in collecting employment models and checking the contents of the book. The Swedish coordinators were Emil Erdtman and Anne Sjöberg from *Handikappförbunden*, the Danish coordinator was Inger Steen Møller from *Huset Venture*, and the Estonian coordinator was Meelis Joost from *Eesti Puuetega Inimeste Koda*⁸.

■ ■ ■ The contents of this book

The book will introduce the reader to the solutions that have proven successful in finding employment for disabled people in four countries around the Baltic Sea. We start from Sweden and move counterclockwise on the map, stopping in Denmark, then Estonia, and finally ending up in Finland. The articles have been constructed so that each writer gives one or more concrete examples of individuals who have moved from outside working life into paid employment (some names have been changed). The story of each person is told in sufficient detail to give the reader a vivid picture of the course of events.

In addition to being a case study, each article introduces an employment model that the case exemplifies, a model that can be applied with other disabled job seekers as well.

⁸ EPIK The Estonian Chamber of Disabled People

The Swedish contribution begins with Riitta-Leena Karlsson who has reviewed the Swedish government's legislative attempts to improve the employment situation of disabled people, as well as the campaign *Se Kraften!*, run by employment officials to draw employers' attention to the hidden resources of disabled people as potential employees. The theme is continued by Lars Ahlenius, introducing the *OpenEyes* project of the City of Stockholm. The changes and accommodations needed at the workplace often become an obstacle to getting a job for the disabled person. In Sweden, attention has been paid to the fact that such adjustment and tailoring can be minimized if a job is found that suits the disabled person in the best possible way – a job where her or his disability does not affect performance in any crucial way. *OpenEyes* locates jobs with this in mind, bringing the job seeker and employer together, and working to ensure that everything goes well. Employment is entered through a work training period. Lars Ahlenius emphasizes the importance of the employee's own motivation and commitment. *OpenEyes* only functions as a means to open doors. It is up to the disabled person her/himself to perform well enough at the job to get long-term employment.

Emil Erdtman from *Handikappförbunden* sheds light on the general situation in Sweden. He describes the ways the state and the municipalities have invested in improving disabled people's employment, critically commenting the current politics in Sweden but also offering case studies of disabled people who have found jobs with the help of the current system. The municipalities and the companies owned by the municipalities have central roles in these success stories. The crucial factors also include the right kind of support and considering the individual needs of each person with regard to what is possible and what is not. A particularly crucial issue is the security and continuity of employment for those who, due to difficult life experiences, have more difficulty than most people in trusting that life will carry them.

The book section on Denmark opens with an employer's perspective by Anika Borbye, a restaurant manager at McDonald's Frederiksberg, recounting the story of Sebastian, a young man with autism and developmental disability who was hired to work at the restaurant. Borbye offers a perceptive analysis of the factors that have led to Sebastian managing his job successfully. She observes that a key ingredient to success when recruiting a disabled person is making him or her an inseparable part of the team. There must be enough time and space in the recruitment situation to get to know the person on the

other side of the table. “As you look at the person in front of you and make observations, you are given the chance to plan working days consisting of different types of tasks for different people.” In addition Borbye stresses that the employer should always make sure that the disabled person has a buddy, someone she or he can always turn to for advice. Employing a young man with a developmental disability at this restaurant was no coincidence: diversity is part of the recruitment policy of McDonald’s. Creating a diverse work community is a company-wide practice, enabling the employment of disabled individuals at individual restaurants.

In the next article, Mikael Hasle describes *Huset Venture* through the life story of a person injured in a traffic accident. *Huset Venture* is yet another successful Danish social enterprise, a business founded by a disabled person and employing dozens of disabled people. “The story of Lars” is an inspiring story of both a disabled survivor and a company where the only viewpoint is the disabled person’s viewpoint.

Following Hasle’s article Anne Sandbeck, a representative of the Danish Center for Social Economy, offers a cross-section of Danish social thinking. Sandbeck focuses particularly on social enterprises which in Denmark form a significant mechanism for employing people with disabilities or reduced ability to work. A central feature of these enterprises is that, on the one hand, they commit themselves to functioning on market principles and selling products and services at fair value, but on the other hand, any profit will be invested back into the company in accordance with ethical goals, not handed out to profit-seeking individuals. Sandbeck explains the principles that guide the functioning of social enterprises and the ethical criteria applied to them in detail, providing several different examples of social enterprises that employ disabled people. These include a café that employs people recovering from mental health problems, a TV station for people with developmental disabilities, a phone sales company that utilizes the sensitive hearing of blind people, an IT company that has turned the natural meticulousness of programmers with Asperger’s syndrome into an advantage, and a restaurant business that offers deaf chefs work practice opportunities. As Sandbeck observes, the special thing about the employment efforts of social enterprises is that they are more than “play employment”. They are real businesses where the people representing the target group are hired to create real profit. Following Sandberg’s article, Inger Steen Møller, executive director of

Huset Venture Nordjylland, discusses her practical experiences in running a social enterprise.

The Danish section ends with an article by Kaj Andersen describing the Vestas Wind Systems dyslexia project. In this project, the careers of people with dyslexia are promoted by offering them a technological reading device. This allows them to accept intellectually more challenging tasks, as reading texts no longer creates an obstacle.

The presentation of the situation in Estonia starts with an article by Leonora Kraus on the courses offered to disabled people by the Saaremaa learning center. Kraus discusses the problems of the Estonian society with regard to employing disabled people: Mental baggage from the Soviet era still affects people's attitudes, and the society is just reaching a stage where remedies are sought for disabled people being stuck in their own homes. Independent life for disabled people is still only an emerging trend, but fortunately a trend of the future, gaining momentum, while in countries like Denmark it is already considered self-evident. However, there are encouraging examples of the entrepreneurship of disabled people in Estonia, too – Kraus describes these in detail. A few EU projects have also led to the development of small business in the form of cooperatives, providing employment to some disabled people, but the lack of support from society has hindered this positive development. The Estonian legislation limits the opportunities of disabled people to become entrepreneurs, and the fragmented nature of project work leads to fragmented support, leaving the cooperatives created by the project to manage on their own once the project funding has ended. And sometimes entrepreneurial team work can fail because of conflicting personal chemistry.

After Kraus's article, Krislin Padjus introduces the Tammistu manor family center maintained by the Agrenska foundation. This center offers opportunities for young people with developmental disabilities to do work practice in a dignified, cultural environment of historical value, in the middle of the green countryside. The work practice units are of different levels of difficulty, so the young people can move stage by stage towards vocational competence in, for example, building management or kitchen work. This is a brilliant example of Estonian perseverance. When the activity is in good hands, even meager resources can be stretched to create an extremely well thought out,

high-quality, constantly developing learning environment where young disabled people can find their wings and gain access to working life. Padjus considers it important to raise the level of general awareness in Estonian society. Publicity campaigns and international networking have been utilized in attempts to make people aware of disability issues and to spread understanding about disabled people needing jobs.

Finally, Ulvi Mölder describes the vocational rehabilitation center at Astangu. This training center serves people with various kinds of disabilities and aims to provide them with vocational skills and access to working life. The employment method applied by Astangu is multi-faceted support based on joint work by a team of professionals. This support team is expanded to include official institutions in the disabled jobseeker's home municipality, as well as his or her family and friends – in other words, everyone within the disabled person's social circle.

The section on Finland starts with the *Employer Counselling* model developed at the *Mood for Work* project, run by the Satakunta University of Applied Sciences. In this model, particular attention has been paid to the needs of the employer: what does the employer need in order to hire a disabled person? A questionnaire survey has shown that employers are interested in hiring disabled people in principle, but they do not have time to go through the paperwork required to receive the appropriate financial benefits, and they often lack information about the special needs of disabled people, as well as about places they could turn to for support in possible problems situations. The employment of disabled people can be promoted by arranging all this beforehand on the employer's behalf and by offering the employer advice on their own terms. The innovative feature of this model is directing the resources to employers to ensure decisions that are positive for the disabled job seekers.

Next, an overview of short courses by *Mielenterveyden keskusliitto* is presented. Kirsi Koskimäki shows how these courses are an effective form of support for people recovering from mental health problems, whose greatest problems in returning to work primarily revolve around social stigma and poor self-esteem. Koskimäki's article highlights peer support and work practice in real workplaces as prerequisites for success. The fact that progress takes place step by step is also emphasized.

These articles are followed by the *ASPA model for supported employment*, a key element of which is a workplace mentor trained to offer support at the workplace, as well as comprehensive professional support for the person returning to working life. The model emphasizes a coaching process that precedes the return to work. Sirpa Paukkeri-Reyes offers a detailed account of a finely honed process that can be used to help even those whose position with regard to the job market is extremely difficult. The support is comprehensive, long-term, and includes both individual and group-based rehabilitation, with the aim of finding paid employment for the person. The section on Finland ends with the project *Sisäänheitto työelämään!* by Lihas-tautiliitto, a project through which 76 disabled people have found jobs. The main idea in this project has been direct cooperation between disability organizations and businesses interested in social responsibility, along with a website where disabled job seekers and job offers have found each other. Liisa-Maija Verainen describes how networking between disability organizations has created the basis for the project's success. The organizations know their members, so the organizations also have a sense of how many skilled workers are sitting idle outside the job market because of disabilities.

After these presentations of institutions, models and strategies the stage is given to two disabled people who have their own experiences of working life, Milla Ilonen who has a mobility impairment and Heta Pukki, representing the autism spectrum. Both have attained the goal of real work through hard effort – Milla Ilonen through her networks and by being active, Heta Pukki by starting her own business. The reader is offered a view into how it feels to be disabled and trying to find employment, and what finding work may require of a disabled person.

■ ■ ■ Acknowledgements

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Helsinki, May 25th 2013

Anna Idström and Marko Stenroos



From the left: Meelis Joos, Estonian coordinator, Marko Stenroos, project manager at Face2Face project, Emil Erdtman, Swedish coordinator, Inger Steen Møller, Danish coordinator, and Raija Mansikkamäki, development manager, ASPA Housing Services Foundation.

SWEDEN

Sweden Infobox

Emil Erdtman

The Swedish Public Employment Service is Urging Employers to See the Potential in Everyone

Riitta-Leena Karlsson

OpenEyes: Career Paths for Young People with Disabilities in Cooperation with Companies

Lars Ahlenius

Employment Experiences of People with Disabilities in Swedish Municipalities

Emil Erdtman and Anne Sjöberg

Sweden Infobox

Emil Erdtman

Sweden is the largest country among the Nordic states – both when it comes to area and population. In this volume, the focus will be on the Swedish policies for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market.

Riitta-Leena Karlsson, the disability ombudsman in the City of Stockholm surveys the current politics for which the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Government's disability policy are the foundations. She also gives an example of how the national Public Employment Service inspires employers to “see the potential” in people with disabilities.

Also from the City of Stockholm, Lars Ahlenius, the project manager for *OpenEyes*, gives an account of the project that started in 2006 and has now been permanently implemented. Within a year and a half thirteen among the seventeen participants got a job in the company where they first had a trainee position. In 2013, twelve of those still keep their employment. We get to read two interesting personal stories from this successful work.

Different Swedish support systems and employment subventions are examined by Emil Erdtman and Anne Sjöberg from the Swedish Disability Federation. They work with the project *Right support to get a job* and spread good examples among Swedish municipalities, which have a certain responsibility for people with intellectual and psychiatric disabilities.

Statistics in Sweden show a negative trend, in spite of all these efforts, when it comes to the employment situation of people with disabilities and reduced work capacity. Thus, developing, discussing and disseminating good employment practices for people with disabilities remains at the top of the agenda.



The Swedish Public Employment Service is Urging Employers to See the Potential in Everyone

Riitta-Leena Karlsson

■ ■ ■ Introduction

The development of a physically accessible society and entry into the workforce for persons with disabilities are priorities in Swedish politics for the disabled. Participation in working life is one of the most important prerequisites for participation in society. However, the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities remains considerably higher than the unemployment percentage among other citizens. Few persons with disabilities have a paid job.

■ ■ ■ Objectives of the disability policy

The Parliament of Sweden has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The convention has been in effect since 2009, and has outlined the determination of the national objectives for disability policy for the period 2011-2016. One of the main objectives relating to labour policy is to increase the opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in working life.

■ ■ ■ Current labour market situation of persons with disabilities in brief

- 16% of Swedish citizens of working age (16–64 years) have a functional restriction and half of them have a reduced working capacity (roughly 0.5 million Swedish people).
- Only one half of disabled people with reduced working capacity are in working life.

- Persons with disabilities in the workforce usually have a part-time job.
- Persons with disabilities have a lower educational level than others.
- Persons with disabilities are significantly more concerned about losing their job than other citizens.
- 1/3 of people with disabilities need tailored working hours, work tasks or speed of work.
- Normal support for the employer is a wage subsidy and occasionally also monetary support for assistive technology.
- 31,100 persons with mental disability, autism or brain damage were in statutory daily activity in 2011. Daily activity is not paid work, but many of those attending it are estimated to have some capability for normal work through appropriate support.

■ ■ ■ **Political direction in the labour market today**

An essential foundation of the current labour policy of the Swedish government is that everyone's capability and willingness to work must be used. The work capacity, skills and possibilities of persons with disabilities must thus be taken into account and their participation in the workforce must be increased. Their resources must be used for the benefit of society, also taking into account the future and ongoing demographic changes. The number of elderly people is increasing, while a diminishing population of working people is responsible for taking care of the rising number of elderly people and their needs.

The Swedish government has made a decision about two main guidelines for labour market policy concerning persons with disabilities covering the period 2011-2016:

- The employment rate of persons with disabilities must increase.
- The matching of available jobs and persons with disabilities must be accelerated.

The government has nominated several state authorities with particular strategic responsibilities to execute the governmental decisions and report on their



observations yearly until 2016. Swedish Public Employment Service is one of these strategic authorities.

■ ■ ■ **A campaign by the Swedish Public Employment Service -
Se kraften! ‘See the potential!’**

The Swedish Public Employment Service challenge all Swedish employers by asking them how they regard persons with disabilities in the workplace? What kind of action has been taken to promote the employment of persons with disabilities?

- The campaign urges employers to focus on the skills, capabilities and possibilities of persons with disabilities rather than on their limitations.
- One of the messages to the employers is as follows: ”in working life a person is not defined by his/her disability or diagnosis – but by his/her competences and aims!”
- The labour offices wish to inform employers, persons with disabilities and others involved in the support of persons with reduced working capacity. This support may include special arrangements based on the needs of the job seeker and the workplace.

The challenge to the employers consists of four steps, which will hopefully lead to opening the door to the workforce for more persons with disabilities than before.

”In working life a person is not defined by his/her disability or diagnosis – but by his/her competences and aims!”

1. Recruiting/*Rekrytera*

When you want to recruit someone, you are naturally also willing to interview jobseekers with disabilities. Pay more attention to skills and personality than limitations.

2. Introduction/*Introducera*

When you hire someone, bear in mind that the beginning of work is of the

utmost importance. Labour officials are eager to share information about appropriate support and the best ways of utilising the skills and competences of the worker.

3. Sharing information/*Sprid kunskap*

Inform your employees that jobseekers with disabilities are most welcome in the workplace, and the qualifications of a person are what matters. Supervisors and other workers will participate in making efforts to ensure that the workplace can make the most of everybody's resources.

4. Setting a good example/*Synliggöra*

Your workplace can use the campaign symbol "Se kraften!" on your webpages, your job advertisements and other materials. Jobseekers and everyone else can thus recognise your workplace as one of those, which takes workers with disabilities positively.

The municipalities of Sweden are responsible for social security according to social welfare legislation (*Socialtjänstlagen-SoL*). The objectives of labour policy increase the pressure on municipalities to co-operate with labour officials and employers.

The City of Stockholm has established *Jobbtorg* (transl. 'job market'), an activity that provides help for persons with disabilities who need income support. This help is provided through work experience placements, other means of support and projects. One of these projects is *Open Eyes*, which is described in depth by Lars Ahlenius in this volume.

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OpenEyes: Career Paths for Young People with Disabilities in Cooperation with Companies

Lars Ahlenius

■ ■ ■ OpenEyes -project – City of Stockholm

OpenEyes started as an idea of Nils Nobrand, who was working for the trade union *SEKO*¹. His idea was to create something good from the fact that young people with disabilities are big consumers of information and technology products, but the majority of them are outside the labour market. The idea is based on the belief that integrating people with different experiences, backgrounds and conditions will develop new and better goods and services and thereby contribute to the company results as well as building career paths for people with disabilities.

The project started in 2006/2007 funded by ESF, and the project period was 18 months. During this period, 17 people applied for and started in the project, two people left the project and another two went on to higher education. The remaining 13 people succeeded in getting a job in the company where they had started their trainee positions earlier. The target group for *OpenEyes* was young people who have disabilities that affect their work capacity. The majority of the clients had physical disabilities rather than mental disabilities. In January 2013, 12 of the initial group of 13 people are still working and have kept their employment within the same company.

Since 2010, the project has been permanently implemented by the City of Stockholm.

¹ The Swedish Union for Service and Communications Employees (SEKO) is a trade union in Sweden.

■ ■ ■ **OpenEyes methods and success factors**

OpenEyes works to create a good match for the individual to reduce the need of adaptation at the workplace. A good personal relationship with the employers and a good knowledge about their needs are some of the success factors. It is also equally important to know the clients and what does or does not work for them. However, the main focus is always on the individual's abilities to work.

Our client starts off with an internship, i. e., work experience placement that can vary between three to six months. During this time, the employer does not pay any wages but is responsible for providing the client with tasks and tutoring. We always try to look for employers with a need to recruit. The aim is always to achieve employment for client but we can never guarantee it. Initially, the client works part-time during the internship. During this period, it is important to frequently follow-up and monitor the progress to avoid a situation where the client decides to stop participating and leaves the internship.

It is important that all parties involved are aware of the goal for the internship period. The employer is initially informed that the aim of the internship is that it will lead to employment for the client. *OpenEyes* intentions are for the employers to find new and talented co-workers, and for the clients to learn the tasks and establish themselves in the labour market. *OpenEyes* can only work as a door opener. It is up to the clients to do a good job in order to get employment.

■ ■ ■ **Peter's story**

Peter is a 39-year-old man who only has nine years of basic school education. The reason why Peter only has basic school education is also why he has a disability. Peter was bullied throughout his school years. This destroyed his childhood and also had a much more far-reaching impact on both his career and adult life. Because of how he was treated throughout school, he suffered from social anxiety and depression. The harassment was both physical and mental, and therefore it was obvious for Peter that once school was no longer mandatory, he would certainly not continue.



Peter therefore started off his professional career with social anxiety, depression, low education and low self-esteem. These are not the best conditions for a young person to find a job and build a career. However, he always wanted to have a job and he did have employment between 1988 and 2003. In 2003, the company he worked for experienced cutbacks and Peter was laid off. This was the beginning of a long period of alienation for him. Because of his low level of education, Peter only looked for jobs that did not require any qualifications. He calls these jobs 'no brain jobs'. When he finally found a job, it often turned out that the employer never actually had the resources to employ anyone, which resulted in Peter going from internship to internship without getting a salary.

All this time, Peter had a desire to get a real job and to get away from the pressure of being on social benefits. He also thought it was very important to be able to contribute to society. In one of his internships, he had worked with helping elderly people with computers. This experience was something that his coach noticed and suggested that Peter should contact *OpenEyes*.

When Peter came into contact with *OpenEyes* he was very confused and unsure of what skills he had and in what field he could find a job. However, he was very clear about the importance of having colleagues with whom he could feel comfortable, and who knew of his difficulties and accepted them. *OpenEyes* began to see what sort of positions and workplaces would suit Peter and decided on the telecom sector. The company in question had for three years been employing a consultant to do some specific work with a billing system, until they acknowledged that it would be more suitable and cheaper to offer this task to an intern with a disability. Because of this, *OpenEyes* set up an appointment with the company for an interview. However, because of his social phobia, Peter did not want to go to the interview on his own. *OpenEyes* therefore called up the company and told them that they would accompany Peter to the interview as support. The supervisor at the company questioned whether Peter would be able to handle the work if he was not able to go to the interview on his own. *OpenEyes* reassured him saying that this was only an initial phenomenon, and with time the anxiety would fade away.

The interview went well and a starting date was set for Peter. Everyone agreed that it would be best for Peter to start by working part-time on 50 percent. This was especially important for Peter, but has proved to be a success factor for many clients of the project. Months pas-

sed and Peter learned more and more in his work, and his self-esteem was also strengthened by having a social context and good colleagues.

After five months of training, it was finally time to talk about full-time employment for Peter. We all came to the conclusion that Peter had come a long way in last five months, but that he still had some way to go before he could work to his full capacity. Peter received his first pay cheque in July 2011. Since then he has been able to get his employment extended and managed to stay employed in the company despite large cutbacks. Today, Peter has gained self-esteem and improved his financial situation considerably.

”Even a person who has been away from the labour market for eight years, and who has a disability and a poor educational background, can do as good a job as an expensive consultant, if s/he is given the chance and the right support.”

There is much to learn from Peter’s case and, for *OpenEyes*, the most important thing is to let people come back in their own time. For Peter it took two years to come back. He did his first week of full-time work in January 2013. That was almost exactly 10 years after he was dismissed from his previous job.

Peter has learned from this experience that he can get a job and manage to work in a position that requires higher qualifications. Previously he would not even have read the advertisements for positions similar to the one he holds today. The employer has learned from this experience that even a person who has been away from the labour market for eight years, and who has a disability and a poor educational background, can do as good a job as an expensive consultant, if s/he is given the chance and the right support.

■ ■ ■ **Gabriella’s story**

Gabriella is an ambitious and happy 26-year-old woman who has completed both high school and college but, because of a brain damage from birth, she has had to face a lot of challenges with things that other people take for granted.



Gabriella's disabilities mostly affect her ability to handle stress, but she also has a problem with balance and distance assessment. This means that accessibility has a major impact on whether she can participate or not. With the additional support of an assistant and customised study materials, Gabriella managed to attend a regular school. It was only when she tried to take the step from school to the labour market that the real challenges began. Even if our recruits are able to perform their work as well as everybody else, it is an obstacle for people with disabilities in the recruitment process if they can only work part-time or need some sort of adaptation or simply cannot get into inaccessible areas.

That was why Gabriella came to *OpenEyes*. She had previously tried different kinds of telemarketing jobs that she had found by herself. However, because of doubt about how her disability would be taken, she did not inform the employer about it. This led to the problem that there was no adaptation made for her and she could not manage the work.

Open Eyes is working very hard to make the matching as good as possible. If you get the right person in the right place, you do not have to change a lot of things. This was the case with Gabriella. She contacted *Open Eyes* in the summer of 2008 with a desire to find an administrative job where she could develop herself in a stress-free environment. We found the perfect job for her at one of the city's own companies. The personnel department in the company recognised the importance of giving a chance to a person with disabilities, and co-incidentally the tasks in the open vacancy were perfect for Gabriella. However, not all was perfect. The company is located in an old and listed building, so accessibility was a problem that had to be solved. We installed railings in the entrance and located her workstation in a room that was accessible for her.

Just like all our other trainees, Gabriella began working half-time. She was given extra support in a stress-free environment to be able to learn everything that work entailed. The work experience placement started in September 2008. In April 2009, the employer and Gabriella thought it was time to talk about normal, paid employment for her. There were still areas for Gabriella to improve so we applied for and obtained a temporary employment grant. Gabriella says that it has always been a comfort to have *OpenEyes* close by, even if she did not need any active support during the trainee period. Also, knowing that everyone was OK with her taking the time she needed to learn

the job made her more relaxed, allowing her to get on with her job. According to Gabriella, it was calming to know that her new employer knew about her disabilities and that they could also contact *OpenEyes* if they had any questions or if they needed support with something.

For Gabriella, it has meant a lot to get an opportunity to enter the labour market. The possibility to get a social context and to do something important is something she shares with all our job applicants. She also said that openness about the disability and courage to accept the help that was offered have been success factors for her.

“The road has not been plain sailing and there are even days now that are really tough, but you just have to choose to try and say ‘yes’ when the chance arises.” Gabriella was given a permanent position within the City of Stockholm in April 2011 and she is still working for the City.

■ ■ ■ Conclusions

There are many factors that determine whether you are excluded from the labour market or if you will experience a rich working life. On an individual level, ambition and motivation are the most important factors that can overcome the issues surrounding almost all disabilities. Parents of disabled youngsters must stop mollycoddling their children, and instead show them what they can accomplish and set realistic goals and expectations for them. Companies too must start thinking ‘outside the box’. If you have a homogeneous group of people producing your goods and services, the products that they produce will fit people similar to themselves. In other words, you lose important market shares because your product is not appealing to everyone. Thinking outside the box and providing an opportunity for a person, who initially does not appear to produce as much as the other workers often proves to have positive effects on other areas that you did not expect from the beginning. Examples of such areas are the general working environment, productivity and empathy. All this can be achieved in the workplace by getting a greater insight and understanding of other people’s lives.



Employment Experiences of People with Disabilities in Swedish Municipalities

Emil Erdtman and Anne Sjöberg

Sweden has nine million inhabitants. The political structure is divided into 21 counties or regions. Number of municipalities is 290. The labour market is traditionally seen as nationwide and employment politics is therefore the responsibility of the State. The authority responsible for matching unemployed people with jobs is The Swedish Public Employment Service (*Arbetsförmedlingen*). Nowadays 35 percent of applicable jobs are announced at its website.

The Swedish Public Employment Service also offers a battery of support tools to facilitate for persons with disabilities to enter the labour market]. The Swedish Public Employment Service assesses the employability of people and tries to find the right support. Another actor is the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (*Försäkringskassan*) which assesses working capacity and offer sickness allowance for those who need it due to impairment.

For persons under 30, this is called activity allowance and has increased dramatically the last years. The right wing government from 2006 and onwards has tried to push people into the labour market by a harsher practice of already existing rules. This has led to thousands losing their sickness allowance and becoming dependent on municipal help.

Between 1998 and 2008, about 30 000 people responded to a survey about labour activity. In the survey, they were asked to state if they had a disability. Approximately 20 percent said they did and out of those, 50 percent had reduced working capacity due to their disability. In 1998, 56 percent of those with reduced working capacity, had some kind of occupation, including municipal daily activity (a right for certain disability groups). In 2008, only 50 percent did. According to these statistics, the trend is negative. Unfortunately, we have no statistics measuring the years after 2008, so we do not know the figures for today. Sweden generally lacks statistics about disability.¹

¹ The recent report *Förutsättningar i arbetslivet* (Statistics Sweden 2013) is not exactly com-

The Swedish Public Employment Service has its own classification and registers applicants according to disabilities, including social medical disabilities where addiction is included. The Swedish Disability Federation has been critical to such a registration, mostly because of its ineffectiveness. Instead of doing the registration immediately and adapting the support accordingly, it is often done after years of unemployment. Of course the aim from the authority is to offer proper support to each individual, but such a registration risks to generalize what is good support according to large categories of disability (and wrong support is bad support).

■ ■ ■ Support to employers and individuals

Support systems tend to change according to political majority and in the moment of writing, a new model is proposed as a result of a governmental investigation. Today wage subsidy is the most common support. It is based on the working capacity of the employee, and salaries for 44 000 persons are partially financed this way. But as the maximum sum an employer can receive is quite low, salaries tend to remain on a lower level than one's colleagues. The wage subsidy can be prolonged after four years.

With public sheltered employment, people with psychiatric disorders or drug addictions may be employed by public employers. Since 2006 there are also some additional support systems: Development employment offers education alongside of work and security employment is an alternative to *Samhall*.

Samhall is a state-owned company which employs people who cannot get another job due to their working capacity. *Samhall* has profit demands and does work for other companies with cleaning, packing etc. Employees cannot be sacked. Some are critical to the "monopoly" of *Samhall* and politicians have noted that it is the most expensive of all employment supports. There is now a suggestion to take away the subventions to the company.

parable with the mentioned studies, but stresses the negative trend. 44 % of people with reduced work capacity (due to disability) *have* work as their main activity (51% for men and 39% for women). For the Swedish population in total the number is 71%. In this inquiry 26 % say they have a disability and 53% of those a reduced work capacity.



The Swedish Public Employment Service offers professional support to persons who need rehabilitation or those with disabilities who are young. Persons with disabilities who need on-the-job training can receive personal introductory help by a specially trained employment officer. The government now wants to enforce this support. Another option is that the employer sets aside staff for an employee who needs extra help. There is financial compensation for this. People with disabilities may be offered aids to compensate their working capacity. Those aids may consist of an adaptation of the work environment as well as a technical device. This support can be provided both to the employee and the employer.

■ ■ ■ **The municipalities and labour politics**

The municipalities are responsible for care and support to persons with disabilities. This includes Daily activity for certain groups, according to the The Swedish Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments (LSS) Those groups are people with (1) Intellectual disabilities, autism or a condition resembling autism, (2) Brain damage and (3) Severe physical or psychiatric disability. Those who have potential should be supported for employment. Efforts in this area vary a lot, but many municipalities see the benefit (for the individual as well as the municipal economy) in getting people employed at the labour market.

Municipalities are also responsible for social psychiatry issues and social assistance according to the Social Service Act. For a person without income, the municipality offers maintenance support. This allowance is nowadays mostly on the condition that studies or work training are undertaken. For municipalities it is sometimes better to employ people instead of supporting them economically. The municipality will get part of this back as taxes and with wage subsidy (from the State) the cost is low.

■ ■ ■ **Right support to get a job**

The Swedish Disability Federation consists currently of 39 national disability organizations. It was founded in 1942 for collaboration between people who were “partially able to work”. Since 2011, the Swedish Disability Federa-

tion has run the project *Right support to get a job*, financed by The Swedish Inheritance Fund. The vision is that disabled people with the right to get support from the municipality will be aware of possibilities to reach, get and retain a job at the labour market (with or without support). The project will run until 2014.

Within the project we collect and investigate experiences in five Swedish municipalities (Hudiksvall, Kristinehamn, Partille, Skellefteå and Tyresö). Successful working methods in the municipalities that lead to employment for people with disabilities are spread at conferences and seminars. Movies and written material are also possible outcomes. The project will also interview employers to better gain an understanding about their needs. In group interviews similar to focus groups, the project gathers stories of persons with disabilities that have employment or are in a municipal activity. Three of these stories are presented here (name are fictitious):

■ ■ ■ Sofia

Sofia lives with her mum and dad and three younger siblings. “I help take care of them. My parents, they support me”, she says. During upper secondary school for learning disabilities, Sofia practiced for two years at a nursery school, the last year two days a week.

Sofia is fond of children, but has not got any specific training in childcare. Before finishing school they had a meeting about her future.

”It was the boss in school, the boss at the nursery and the guidance counselor and I. They asked if I wanted to continue there and I did and then I could.”

After secondary school she went to the nursery school daily for practice, but eventually the headmaster offered her employment:

”She thought I could get employment. And then we had a meeting, the headmaster and so... The Public Employment Service and so.”

”And then we talked a bit. My boss, she wanted to. But she had to see if they had the money. And they had, so I could stay.”



Sofia is asked to explain more about her employment and says: "I was employed two months ago, but I don't know what kind of employment it is."

For Sofia the important thing is to have a job and a salary, not what kind of subvention her employer is receiving.

At work Sofia plays with the children. "We make animals out of beads, and they like that. Arts and crafts and stuff like that, it's fun.

Sofia says she does the things they want her to do. She stresses that she has developed and has got better at reprimanding the children. She takes them away if they do something they shouldn't. Something positive Sofia has experienced is that some of the parents have asked her about their children and what they have done during the day.

Sofia has been offered to participate in planning and meetings, but she says she usually doesn't assist. "It seems boring and I don't want to." The rest of the staff has said that it is probably more fun for her to be with the children and Sofia agrees.

Sofia has a contact person at work, someone she can turn to for support and questions. "...but I usually ask everybody and talk to everybody... If there is something I don't know I can ask anyone." Sofia also asks the children what they want. "They are the ones who should decide", she says.

■ ■ ■ Per

Per's father worked at the seas and got cancer when he was 12. He describes his mother as stupid, partly because that's what she always has called him. "She does not know anything about Asperger's syndrome". Per didn't finish secondary school due to a suicide attempt. But:

"I have always liked learning things, but the environment with social interaction and loud noises was a problem for me. I was interested in things not appropriate for my age and got bullied."

From the age of nine, computers has been Per's great hobby. He studied

mathematics at university and has taught English and computing. “I like speaking if the topic is interesting enough”. Per has worked as a programmer with good salary, but he sees programming as an art, and got in trouble with employers due to deadlines. He was transferred to another unit of the company, but didn’t like it and was “more or less sacked”.

Periods of unemployment and subsequent depressions have alternated with intensive work periods. Per suspects a bipolar syndrome. He has been in therapy, but says he got off the bus a couple of stops early because he felt ashamed. In his forties he was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome, which explains his feelings of being different. He has also started to think more about his body language, and manners like looking people in the eye and greeting, and not taking up other people’s words. Otherwise, ”they think I see myself as superior”.

Per says he has always acquired his jobs on his own, in spite of bad self-esteem. From Public Employment Service he has got no help. But last time he was in touch with them, a good case officer recommended *Solkraft* (a municipal enterprise that carries out tasks like helping elderly to shop etc). “She was resolute and made things happen”. His first task at *Solkraft* was to put together lamps. But they also had a computer workshop where they repaired and restored old computers for sale. Per got a public sheltered employment there, and after a while he got a security employment, working afternoons (his most creative time is after midnight).

Per earns 1000 euros a month. ”In comparison to earlier jobs the salary is not good, but the lack of stress compensates for that”. He cannot afford any luxury, but is satisfied with his situation. Per is also satisfied with his tutor at work even if ”she doesn’t know that much about computers”. But when a client yelled at him and he got angry and threw the client’s computer on the floor, the tutor gave him support.

Per has half-time sickness allowance from the Social Insurance Agency, but is not satisfied with their service. They changed case workers six times during a period and one of them had “a mentality of a petty king” and got angry at him when he worked a little bit in an antiquarian bookshop (while having sickness allowance). “She ought to be glad that I told her the truth”, Per says.



People ask Per why he works at *Solkraft* when he is so smart, but he has professional pride and likes his job. Although, sometimes he thinks of starting up a software company together with others who can provide the marketing skills.

■ ■ ■ Stefan

Stefan is 34 years old and grew up with his mother and siblings in various places in northern Sweden. Two years ago his mother died. “She was everything in our lives”, Stefan says.

Throughout school he was placed in small groups to get more help. In school, he loved sports and was offered a basketball scholarship. But he felt “lost” and “ended up in bad company”. Drugs like cannabis, amphetamine, and then heroin took over.”

He managed to finish upper secondary school where he studied painting within the building and construction programme, but two years after graduation, Stefan went to his first treatment home for addicts.

Things didn’t turn around until five years later when Stefan got to start a Subutex treatment in the small town where he lived. At the same time, the social service in the municipality offered him a rehabilitation placement at Rosengård, a part of the municipal social enterprise *Solkraft*.

“It just felt right immediately with those who worked there”, Stefan says. He likens it to one of the places he liked in his childhood. He started part time at Rosengård. “I was fragile after the treatment”. But when the tutors explained to him about public sheltered employment, he got curious. That also meant a little more money. He stayed within a Public sheltered employment for four years. “To breathe and to find myself”, as he says.

Stefan explains what support he got:

”They accepted what I said. Sometimes other people give you looks, as if they are afraid. “You’re an addict, you’re like that, they think – and then you get more guarded”. But I never got that feeling at Rosengård.”

”They understood that it was troublesome getting up in the morning. My tutor came and picked me up and said that we would take things step by step.”

Stefan says he was shocked by their patience.

”They worked with me, and only me, and how I was. I could grow into the person I wanted to be. I could go to my contact person and psychologist

and there were no problems. ”We will be here for you,’ they said, and let me come and go.”

Stefan still has contact with his tutor. ”He calls us his stepsons”.

At Rosengård, Stefan washed cars, worked in the bakery, helped in the dog caring facility and gardened.

”They asked what I would like to do outside,” he says. ”They gave me images of different activities and I chose cards that described what I liked and it ended up with flowers, garden and fragrances.”

He describes the work he had in the garden as ”physical work in a tranquil atmosphere”. After that, he got a security employment at a printing house, also within *Solkraft*. ”At the printing house they demand more of me”, he says.

Stefan goes to pick up his medication 4 times a week. He has a contact person with whom he had much contact after his mother’s death. He has a debt-reduction plan from the Swedish Enforcement Authority and has around 500 euros left a month after paying the debts. ”The Enforcement Authority is more generous than the municipal social assistance,” he states.

Stefan dreams of having a girlfriend, but doesn’t know how to meet one. He is not able to be out and about in pubs and bars and doesn’t like computers.



Conclusions

The municipalities we work with have long-term strategies to get people with disabilities employed. As municipalities (especially in the countryside) are the largest employers in a town it is important to employ persons with disabilities within existing services. Some municipalities have measurable goals in this area. Those goals are currently used in temporal projects, but can be practiced in permanent efforts as well.

“We see that an important factor in retaining a job is to have a supporting mentor over time”

Today municipal and state authorities have new ways of collaborating. A network of municipalities works after the principle ”one way in”, meaning that the individual should only need to get in touch with one instance for all issues. A few municipalities have this arrangement through something called “coordination associations” where the municipality, The Swedish Public Employment Service, The Swedish Social Insurance Agency, health care and other relevant instances share the costs. This is an attempt to put the individual in focus and avoid tensions between different suppliers.

From the group interviews, we see that an important factor in retaining a job is to have a supporting mentor over time, even after getting a permanent job. We have noted that trust towards such a mentor is more important than his/her official function. Engaged support from key persons around the individual, for example family and staff at home facilities, is also essential. Professional supporters ought to treat the individual with respect and focus on the potential instead of deficiencies. Every person can work to his/her full capability!

DENMARK

A Decent Job at McDonald's

Annika Borbye

Lars's Story

Mikael Hasle

People with Disabilities Employed by Social Enterprises in Denmark

Anne Sandbeck

An example of a Social Enterprise – *Huset Venture*

Inger Steen Moeller

An IT Innovation to Support the Work Competence of People with Reading/Spelling Difficulties

Kaj Andersen

A Decent Job at McDonald's

Annika Borbye

■ ■ ■ McDonald's Frederiksberg

McDonald's in the Frederiksberg district of Copenhagen is open 24/7. There are 55 employees, seven shift managers, two assistant managers and one restaurant manager. It is situated in the centre of Copenhagen, in a family-friendly environment. It does not have a Drive-Thru as many other restaurants, and therefore the hospitable atmosphere in the restaurant is important, as all our guests enjoy their meals at the tables inside.

■ ■ ■ Why is diversity important at McDonald's in Denmark?

At McDonald's, diversity is very important when it comes to creating a high-performance team. It is actually so important, that McDonald's has a policy for it. It states: "*We are not just a hamburger company serving people – we are a people company serving hamburgers*".

McDonald's works actively to create a diverse group of employees, who differ from each other in such aspects as nationality, gender, religion, age and disabilities. In 2009, we received MIAPRISEN¹ (awarded by the Institute for human rights). Our diversity policy is an important component in our success, because it allows employees with different backgrounds and approaches to life to contribute with different talents. This strengthens our ability to handle the challenges and conflicts of daily life in the restaurants. The restaurants are active in making sure that the staff composition reflects the local area. This contributes to our guests feeling welcome in our restaurants.

Diversity is a part of McDonald's DNA. When we are looking for new employees, we do not judge them by their grades, CV or colour of skin. Instead we look at the person standing in front of us as a whole and especially his/her approach to life and attitude towards work.

¹ For further information see www.miapris.dk

This work is all about approach – the approach we have towards our guests in the restaurants, to our colleagues, to our work, and to making sure that the people who surround us are happy. If you as an applicant are ready to make a difference, then it is up to you how far you would like to advance or develop in the McDonald's system – to us the effort and engagement each individual puts in is what matters.

When we receive an application from someone who wants to work at McDonald's, we consider how this person would fit into the team. If the applicant has physical or mental challenges, we do not see this as an insurmountable problem. Instead we seek possibilities to find a job for this person in a way that makes sense to the employee and us. It is important that the tasks are meaningful and that they serve the needs of the restaurant. Through these guidelines, we also ensure good inclusion of the employee in the workplace. If we want to succeed with hiring, it is crucial that the employee is seamlessly included in the team and feels an equal colleague and participant.

McDonald's wants to be active in creating workplaces for the local society. It has good contacts with both *LEV* (Danish organisation for people with disabilities) and Frederiksberg Commune. This ambition not only creates advantages for employees with special needs, but also the other employees in the restaurant gain benefit from the diversity ambition as well by having colleagues with different backgrounds, age, abilities, life perspectives, etc., since this expands their view of life and their tolerance for differences. Therefore diversity in the restaurant has elicited positive responses from the guests, and additionally produced extra service for them. We are a customer-orientated company and in the restaurant we see clear coherence between diversity and customer satisfaction, and we believe this will continue to build McDonald's business in the future.

■ ■ ■ Sebastian's story

The following story about Sebastian is not merely another anecdote of a boy who got a job. It is an example of creating a culture in a workplace, where the approach to managing the staff team is inclusion instead of exclusion. Inclusion of all people in the workplace requires maturity, a good attitude and

courage, because social borders are crossed and awkward situations arise. Sebastian is an 18 year-old man diagnosed with autism and mental disability. He has spent his life attending special schools and travelling on special buses designed for people with mental and physical disabilities – all in all, he has been segregated from normal society.



In Sebastian's case, autism is not as prominent as in many other cases. He is adaptable and able to deal with changes in everyday life. His cognitive level is fluctuating. He can understand and engage in dialogue about everyday issues. He may be confused if his conversation partner uses irony or figurative language, but he is good at asking if there is something he does not understand. Sebastian is challenged when it comes to reading and writing, but at the same time he is a very social person – helpful and attentive to others. Despite his autism, he can consider how other people think and feel, which makes it easy and pleasant to deal with him.

When Sebastian was 15 years old, he decided to apply for a job at McDonald's. Aided by his mother, he contacted the human resources department, and was invited to an interview. Sebastian was worried because he could not

even write his own name, let alone anything else. He was relieved to know that writing skills are not a requirement to work at McDonald's, as long as you are good at your work.

On Sebastian's first day of work, he received a uniform like everyone else. His pride and happiness was indescribable. The uniform was a symbol of *belonging*. He was a part of the crew of McDonald's Frederiksberg. When he got home, he went around ringing doorbells and, when his neighbours opened the door, he just stood there and smiled proudly.

The biggest challenge for Sebastian at the beginning was to get used to not having a support teacher on the job. He had to wash trays, clean toilets, sweep the floor, etc., and he had to learn to see by himself when something was needed.

■ ■ ■ **The social side of the job**

In addition to the physical tasks described above, a job is a social issue. This was assessed as a potential challenge considering Sebastian's disability. We had some worries, like what happens if he becomes lonely? Would he be bullied, or ignored? How would the youngsters at work welcome him?

On one of the first days at work, a colleague asked Sebastian if he REALLY wanted to work every weekend – why didn't he want to be hanging out with his friends? Sebastian answered honestly that he did not have any friends. This blew the colleague away. He speechlessly stared at Sebastian, who in turn asked him,

”The meaning of becoming someone who CAN give something to others was obviously significant.”

“do you think that I am lying? I never lie!” This meeting between these two people was good, because it expanded the colleague's view of the diversity of human beings. He found that there are other ways to live than those he knew of. In that moment, he discovered qualities in people who are different.

Thus, for us Sebastian is an asset. In return his social skills are now developing as he is working in an environment where he is among other youngsters – people who are different from him. For example, during Ramadan he



found out that many of the other employees were not eating their permitted staff food. Consequently, he could take a lot of food home for his family to share. This incident developed his ability to share and taught him to know the joy of giving. The meaning of becoming someone who CAN give something to others was obviously significant. It led to the current situation in which Sebastian now buys birthday presents on his own initiative – he never did before his job at McDonald’s.

Prior to his first staff party, he was naturally very nervous. This was the first time he would attend to a party without a support teacher. He was thinking about how this party would be with nobody to take care of him. His worries were fortunately unnecessary – on the contrary, this evening was a good test for us to see how deeply included he was in the team. It is not easy being an autistic person at a party. The party planner had done her best to make sure that Sebastian would feel comfortable. She had been to four stores to find special non-alcoholic beer for him, so that he could drink beer with the other staff members without feeling sick. Another party planner had made a schedule to make sure that he was never alone at the party. Furthermore, instead of being picked up by his parents, he got a ride in a jeep with four others, so that he got home safely.

His mother says, “we know that Sebastian is included in a community, because he feels included. And he feels included because his managers and colleagues make an effort for this to happen, just as Sebastian makes a big effort to fulfill his role both physically and mentally”. I think this is the true ‘recipe’ for success when dealing with a crew including members with disabilities. It is important to care, to have a positive attitude towards wanting to make it work, and to distinguish between physical integration and psychological inclusion. Only when an employee feels like a part of the community have we achieved inclusion.

■ ■ ■ Challenges

One of Sebastian’s limitations is that he does not work as fast as others. He tries to compensate for this by never taking a break and never being late. He does what he can to be a good employee. Another restriction is that he cannot cook. Moreover, he may misunderstand a situation. In such a case,

he never becomes unpleasant or aggressive, but he can be upset, which he shows when he comes home. Thus, on one hand he is a less flexible employee because he does not master all workstations, but then on the other hand he takes great pride in making the lobby sparkle.

Sebastian does not have as fine motor control as a 'normal' employee, and is therefore challenged in some tasks such as tying knots on balloons. This obstacle is not something to stop him. Instead of trying to make knots, he likes to give the balloons to the kids, and gets help from a colleague to tie the knots.

When Sebastian started working at McDonald's, he spoke only Danish. In his new job, he met a shift manager who spoke only English. This triggered a motivation for Sebastian to learn English. Sebastian's English skills are now growing all the time. He has now mastered everyday English relatively well. He practises it daily and has become particularly skilled at "lobby English". He knows and can apply concepts such as "wiping tables", "sweeping the floor", "washing trays", "emptying the trash", "sweeping the streets" and "cleaning the toilet", just as he gets practice in talking politely to customers: "Can I help?" – "You can get answers to your questions at the cash register".

■ ■ ■ **Tools to overcome challenges**

To help Sebastian adapt to his job, we had to train him in a different way than how we train other employees, because he does not read or write, nor can he absorb too much information at once. Therefore we created a tool to help him remember which tasks he should do at what time. We made, inspired by the TEACH-system, small pictograms with tasks such as 'clean the tables', 'wash the trays', 'empty the trash cans' and 'sweep the floor'. Every day when he came to work, we put up the pictograms on a Velcro tapeline in the order in which we wanted the tasks to be done, and when he had finished one task, he took the pictogram down. When there were no more pictograms left, he gave them to the manager. We put them up again in order, and he started the same over again.

This was a structured and easy tool to guide Sebastian in his work. After 6-12 months he no longer needed the pictograms, because he felt secure



and self-confident in knowing which tasks to perform, so we took down the Velcro tape. This was a big day.

A year ago, he was at the half-yearly employee review meeting. We invited his mother as well to make sure that he understood and remembered everything. This was an opportunity to give positive feedback on his work ethics and attitude. He now knew all the tasks and felt confident in accepting new challenges: To give balloons and free coffee to guests in the dining area. This has now been working for six months, and he keeps on developing his social skills towards better interaction with people.

■ ■ ■ **The future at McDonald's?**

Sebastian has long dreamed of being able to work in England and to learn more English. He wants to be a better employee who can speak with tourists and answer their questions. Furthermore, he is a cosmopolitan who loves to travel and meet new people.

A job at McDonald's has become an integral part of Sebastian's identity. He is proud of belonging to the global McDonald's team. He wears his uniform with joy and spends a lot of time considering how he can become a better employee. He tries to make his managers happy and nothing pleases him more than to be praised by customers or managers. His career goal is to become the top lobby employee in the world and to work for McDonald's until his retirement.

Later this year Sebastian will use his McPassport to go to London where he will work for 14 days in another McDonald's. His mother will accompany him on the trip. This also shows that thinking about diversity is not only something that is done in Denmark, but it is a part of our DNA.

■ ■ ■ **What made Sebastian's case a success?**

We believe that the key factor that brings success when employing persons with disabilities is to include them in the team. There should be a clear plan, a firm structure, and space and time to acquaint oneself with the individual

on the other side of the table. Every day is a new chance to become better and better at what you do, whether you have disabilities or not.

To make sure that your employment of a person with a disability is a success, you should make sure that there is a buddy for him/her, so that he/she always knows whom to ask.

Making a structured day plan for the employee will make him/her feel safe. In a safe environment, the employee will have a better chance to develop and shine through. Looking at the person in front of you and making observations gives you the opportunity to make different plans for different people. Moreover, you should not do this because it is good PR, but because you can see it as an asset to your business and your crew.

At McDonald's, diversity has become a competitive advantage, and we would like to inspire other companies and leaders to see people through our eyes. There are too many people with resources just walking around in our society today, without the meaning and purpose a job can give in their life. We invite all to see the talent and possibilities in these people – or else we will all be future losers.

Lars's Story

Mikael Hasle

■ ■ ■ Introduction

Reading this article, you may wonder which model or scheme it is based on – and the answer is: none! The story is meant as an eye-opener and an inspiration – an inspiration to think differently and to make the facts of life fit the given circumstances. It may, therefore, hopefully make you see the practical reality in a different way, make you see possibilities, not obstacles. This is the unusual story of how unique legislation, willpower, flexibility, creative thinking and a budding company can overcome formidable obstacles – this is the story of Lars.

In 1992, Lars was 28 years old. He was married, had two daughters and a newborn son. After having worked at a kindergarten for several years, he had started training for a job in fish farming in his home town of Silkeborg. In other words, everything was fine. Lars's family was happy – and then disaster struck.

Late one autumn night in 1992, Lars was driving home from a party in the neighbouring city of Aarhus. He had been offered accommodation for the night but had preferred the 40-kilometre drive home to his family. Just before reaching his destination, he lost control of the car and crashed into the woods by the road. He was rushed by ambulance to the local hospital, where the doctors soon realised that his injuries were too severe to be treated locally. So he was rushed to the larger



university hospital in Aarhus. For some days his diagnosis was not clear, but finally Lars was told that he was paralysed from his chest down, and that he would never walk again!

■ ■ ■ Hospitals

Lars' stay at the university hospital lasted for six weeks until the effects of the accident were stabilised to an extent that made it possible to start a rehabilitation programme. Lars was transferred to Viborg Hospital, 30 kilometers from Silkeborg. The stay in Viborg was focused on Lars' physical rehabilitation and on the preparation for his new life in a wheelchair. While he was still at the hospital, Lars and his wife rented a house just outside Silkeborg and, when he was discharged in April 1993, the Silkeborg local authority fitted the house to suit a wheelchair user. According to Danish law, this special fitting out – the levelling of floors, lowering of kitchen tables and fittings, remodelling of the bathroom – is done at no expense to the disabled person. This meant that when Lars came home, the home was more or less fitted to his needs.

■ ■ ■ Meanwhile

While all this was going on and Lars was preparing himself for a new life, in Aarhus a group of young people with disabilities made a plan. They were well-educated and had each applied for dozens of jobs, but no company wanted to employ them. They tried to find solutions to this problem, and the only solution they could think of was starting their own company, a company based on the working capacity of people with disabilities. Supported by a local member of the Danish parliament, they applied for and received an EU grant to develop their idea. We will get back to them later.

■ ■ ■ Back to Lars

Facing the future without manual work as an option, Lars had to give up his plan of working in fish farming. The many months of hospitalisation and physical training had given him plenty of time to ponder his future. He



could not work at a kindergarten, either, and little by little he began to think about an academic career. He decided to study law at Aarhus University and started in September 1993. In Denmark, a disabled person is entitled to a specially fitted car at a very low price. Lars' car was not ready when he began his studies, and for the first couple of months he was transported to Aarhus by taxi at the expense of the local authority. Time passed and Lars gradually got accustomed to his life as a student and a wheelchair user.

■ ■ ■ **Meanwhile**

While Lars started his new life, the young disabled people in Aarhus were still working on their plans to create their own company, to create jobs for themselves and others in a similar situation. By 1998, they were ready to inform the world about their visions. So they arranged a public information meeting. At the meeting they explained the idea behind the new company and announced the company name: *Huset Venture*.

■ ■ ■ **Back to university**

In 1998, Lars was still studying law, but he was getting tired of it. Accessibility at the university was not good, and he found the prospect of becoming a lawyer a bit tedious. When he saw an advertisement in the local newspaper about an information meeting announcing the plans for a new company with room for people with disabilities, it set his mind working. "Perhaps I can have a future there – let's see!" he thought. Lars went to the meeting and, finding it very interesting, maintained contact with the people behind the company.

In other respects, Lars had reached a turning point. He and his wife had bought a house, had got divorced and he was so tired of studying that, in the summer of 1998, he applied for leave from the university – a leave he intended to use to face the world and himself. To this end he attended a four-month course at The Folk School for Development of Consciousness where he learned about Eastern thinking, spiritual insight, meditation, and healthy living – and met his future wife.

■ ■ ■ What now?

Back in his new house with his new wife, Lars still had not come to terms with his future, and he spent much of 1999 pondering his options. In September, the new Aarhus company *Huset Venture* opened its doors to the world, and in October they advertised for employees. This caught Lars' attention. He applied for the post of secretary to the management and was invited to Aarhus for an interview.

■ ■ ■ A little step back

Until this moment, in Lars' mind his financial future had been clear-cut: Danish people with disabilities are entitled to a life-long disability pension and, regarding work, the rules until 1998 said that you could keep your pension and work for a few hours a week in a low-paid, so-called "light" job. But in 1998, a new law was passed – the law on "flexible jobs". This meant a *graduation* of disabilities, meaning that if your remaining working capacity was at a certain level, you would not be eligible for a disability pension and, perhaps, a light job, but would be referred to further testing and a trainee period. If this resulted in a referral to a flexible job, you would then be employed under the same conditions as your non-disabled colleagues. In practice this meant that, after testing and trainee period(s) had shown how many hours a week you could work and under which circumstances, you would be paid the same as your colleagues. Your employer would then get a refund from the government of 1/2 or 2/3 of your wage (depending on your working capacity). This served as an incentive to the companies and as compensation for the hours you were not able to work. Furthermore, any physical alterations at the workplace necessary for the employment of a person with a disability (e.g. entrance ramps, special bathroom facilities, etc.) were partially paid by the local authority. If you were not able to find a flexible job, you would receive unemployment benefit.

■ ■ ■ And now back to *Huset Venture*

By 1998, when Lars had his first interview with the manager of *Huset Venture*, Peter Jørgensen, flexible jobs were a new thing and not much was



known about them, least of all how to administer them. However, the interview proceeded to the satisfaction of both parties and it was agreed that Lars should have the job. He could start right away, and the first months were used to determine the number of Lars's working hours and finding out if any physical alterations at the work place were necessary. The latter part was easy, as Lars recounts:

“The company was established by and for people with physical disabilities and all the necessary alterations were in place: there was an access ramp, the bathrooms had wide doors, arm supports and room for a wheelchair. etc. Everything was as it should be.”

As for the former part, the story is quite different, as Lars explains:

“In my mind I could work the normal 37 hours a week – I didn't feel disabled. I knew there were things I couldn't do – but I was convinced that work-wise I was at full speed. The testing and the new job gave me a different view!”

■ ■ ■ **A new reality**

Lars had his first official work day after his accident on February 1st, 2000. The company being what it was, his 8-10 colleagues – except for Peter, the CEO – all had physical disabilities and Lars felt surrounded by peers. The employees all felt equal, and the slowly developing *Huset Venture* was a joint project, but they had to realise that running a business based on the residual work skills of the disabled demands a particular frame of mind. In addition to boundless enthusiasm, you need a good deal of patience – things take time!

”We see ourselves as role models that “normal” companies can learn from when it comes to flexibility, open-mindedness and a creative frame of mind.”

■ ■ ■ “Available talent”

At the very beginning of *Huset Venture*, the founders' goal had been reached – and this left one big question: what should the company do? They had all got a job – which was the ambition – but did they have the talents to run a professional company? Lars explains:

“We had to start thinking creatively, and the first thing we did was look amongst ourselves – who could do what, what were our skills? We quickly found out that one could design business cards, one had a skeleton knowledge of web design and so on. Our landlord said he knew an accountant in a wheelchair, and could we use him?”

“In this fashion, the first two or three years passed, and we were lucky to have a government grant to support us, because we didn't make any money at all! It was a crazy, bubbly time, and we had a lot of fun – but we had to do something drastic in order to start making money.”

And something drastic they did. For the first couple of years, the only qualification required to get a job at *Huset Venture* was to be a wheelchair user – no-one looked at your professional background. This was changed, as Lars recalls:

“We started to think more like a company than like another job project for the disabled. We started looking at the applicants' professional skills. We didn't, however, like the idea of turning down people without having anything else to offer them, and in 2003 we started what was later to become our training and clarification section, offering people with disabilities a chance to clarify their professional and human/social skills amongst their peers. This section today has grown to make us a professional partner in the rehabilitation and qualification effort.”



“We started with nothing – apart from barely a dozen employees with almost no professional skills among them. But we adopted a new way of thinking, we literally created it ourselves, and now we have a staff of almost 100 employees of whom only 8-10 don’t have a disability.”

■ ■ ■ **Upside down**

In Lars’s opinion, what *Huset Venture* did was turning things upside down:

“In any other company employing people with disabilities, the disabled is the odd man out, and we turned that on its head. Having only about 10 percent non-disabled in our staff, we, the disabled, set the standards, and the company’s mindset is to focus on the possibilities in a person rather than the obstacles. That means that our entire organisation has the point of view of the disabled person. We know that things take time, and we set our delivery deadlines in accordance with that. We know that our staff is vulnerable to illness, etc., and we compensate for that by assigning more employees to each task. We know that other companies are watching us to ensure that we work on market terms, and we do work on market terms. We see ourselves as role models that “normal” companies can learn from when it comes to flexibility, open-mindedness and a creative frame of mind.”

In Lars’ opinion, *Huset Venture* is a company to be proud of:

“We were all amateurs, and in many respects we still are, but we tried. The number of bricks we dropped on the way is huge – but the number of people whose dignity we have restored is higher. We are proud of what we have created, and we will keep on working – all of us – as this is bigger than all of us.”

■ ■ ■ **Nowadays**

Lars has risen through the ranks and is now head of the business section and sales manager at *Huset Venture*.

Huset Venture was the first company in Denmark to define itself as social economic. This means that it has a social purpose (creating jobs for people with special needs) and that any profit made should be used to fulfil this purpose. The company was founded in 1999 and now has 150 employees. Three more companies based on the same idea have been established in other parts of Denmark.

People with Disabilities Employed by Social Enterprises in Denmark

Anne Sandbeck

Social enterprise is a term that covers different fields and approaches in different countries. This article describes the approach used in Denmark and at the Danish Centre for Social Economy, the national research centre for social economic research in Denmark, in particular. Social enterprise is a collective term for a way of combining thoughts from different sectors into a hybrid of the best elements from a variety of fields, the purpose being to make a difference to society in an economically sustainable manner.

It is closely connected to the concept of common good. The field is characterised by a diversity of different approaches that will make a difference in society, whether at national or international level. The approach of enterprises may alternate between integrating members of a specific target group for which the enterprise has opted to make a difference, for example by employing them, or merely applying profits to meet the objective.

This article focuses mainly on social enterprises using the tool of employment and in particular on the enterprises creating jobs for persons with a disability. Before giving specific examples, the concept of social enterprise in a Danish context will be introduced.

■ ■ ■ The Danish Centre for Social Economy

The Danish Centre for Social Economy was established in 2005 by the social economic foundation of '*socialokonomi.dk*'. The Centre has grown since then to become the national research centre for social economic research. The Centre is funded partly by public funds and partly by winning projects and selling consultancy services. The objective of the Centre for Social Economy is to contribute to the development of more, larger and stronger social economic enterprises in Denmark. This objective is achieved by gathering knowledge on and from the field through its network, entrepreneurial advi-

sory services and other initiatives, which establish direct contact with members of its target group and their clients. This knowledge is applied to analysing subjects like social innovation in social enterprises, which paves the way for information campaigns and advocacy activities in society in general as well as some aimed more specifically at decision-makers.

■ ■ ■ **Definition of a social enterprise**

The Centre for Social Economy applies the following definition of a social enterprise.¹ The overall characteristics of a social enterprise are that:

- It pursues a social, health and/or environmental objective
- It sells services and/or products
- It re-invests any profits in the enterprise for the purpose of furthering the objective
- It is structurally independent of the public sector
- It is registered in the Central Business Register

■ ■ ■ **Objectives**

A social enterprise is an enterprise that is committed to solving a specific social ill, which may extend from the labour market integration of excluded individuals to environmental protection or microfinancing.

“The difference between social enterprises and other private enterprises is that all profits of social enterprises are re-invested to further the objective of the enterprise as such, and not distributed to any individuals as dividends.”

Due to the social, health or environmental objectives of social enterprises, these enterprises mainly exist to create social value for a specific target group or to undertake initiatives for the common good. Their objectives are diverse, often combining several objectives, which is considered an obvious thing for a value-based enterprise.

¹ *National Civilsamlivsstrategi* (National Civil Society Strategy), p. 44, Danish Ministry of Social Affairs, October 2011.



The idea of running an enterprise with a value-based objective comes from civil society thinking and the NGO sector in which activities may be triggered by associations, societies and individuals driven by social indignation.

A large proportion of social enterprises employ persons balancing on the edge of the labour market, or persons otherwise in need of particular attention due to their age, family issues or other challenges. In those situations, these enterprises take on a task usually associated with government responsibility, selling places on programmes or providing services to the government as a means to achieve their specific objectives. The value-based approach of social enterprises makes it possible, from a societal perspective, to apply a myriad of methods to the provision of welfare services.

■ ■ ■ **Business models**

Social enterprises make a living by selling services and products to all sectors and industries on market terms. Accordingly, it is a prerequisite that the individual enterprise supplies services and products meeting market demands and of sufficiently high quality to maintain the demand, also after the initial purchase. To this end, the enterprise must think and act as a private enterprise, which may entail a challenge if the focus on its objective becomes too prominent. Things need to be balanced.

The difference between social enterprises and other private enterprises is that all profits of social enterprises are re-invested to further the objective of the enterprise as such, and not distributed to any individuals as dividends. Thus, social enterprises are not-for-profit enterprises. Just like associations, their main objective is not profits as such, although they consider profits a necessary prerequisite for being able to make the difference intended and to boost their efforts by the establishment of a sustainable and growing economy.

This means that social enterprises act on the basis of a double bottom line, focusing on the creation of both economic and social value. The aim of serving the common good means that social enterprises benefit from having the possibility to act on the basis of long-term strategies as they are not subject

to the same incentives based on short-term profit maximization as for-profit enterprises are. The involvement of many Danish social enterprises in the public benefit system implies considerable financial interaction between the public sector and social enterprises; still social enterprises have to be independent of the public sector to maintain their scope of action.

■ ■ ■ **Social enterprises and employment initiatives**

Basically, social enterprises can be divided according to whether they work for the benefit of or together with a particular target group. Social enterprises working for the benefit of a target group will meet their objectives in practice by donating any profits for a particular purpose, contributing volunteer hours or collecting items for the benefit of the cause.

Social enterprises working together with a specific target group are, however, engaged in activities such as employment initiatives and the creation of jobs for vulnerable groups. In real life, many social enterprises do, however, work both for the benefit of and together with a specific target group.

When looking at workplaces in the public sector, whether in the nature of sheltered occupation, ordinary occupation or job activation schemes, local authorities have limited possibilities to create jobs involving sales to and interaction with the surrounding community.

The reason is the limited powers of local authorities and the consequent restricted possibility of engaging in commercial activities on market terms because of the risk of distorting competition in the private-sector labour market. On the other hand, commercial enterprises operating for profit often consider it difficult to create a sufficiently inclusive setting in which workplaces and tasks are adapted to the needs of the target group.

This is where social enterprises possess a particular advantage for the benefit of employment initiatives and job creation schemes for vulnerable groups as they combine employment and social efforts with real production on market terms without distorting competition.

Such activities do not distort competition because any enterprise may freely

sell places on programmes to the government or hire persons under flexible or light job schemes, and because the price of services produced by those employees matches the price quoted by corresponding enterprises. It may be difficult for social enterprises to generate a profit because it requires extraordinary social efforts to create workplaces for mentally vulnerable or developmentally impaired people or persons with other disabilities.

Social enterprises are able to create inclusive workplaces and improve the competencies of the persons of the target group by adapting workplaces and tasks to these persons' special individual needs. Persons of the target group and everybody else at the workplace therefore become equals, and it is apparent to the persons of the target group that their contribution to the production is important for the quality of the product or service in question. This contribution is to make customers come back.

What is special about the employment initiatives of social enterprises is that these initiatives are more than an 'employment game'; they are real initiatives under which persons in the target group are hired to perform real production. Examples of social enterprises employing or training persons with a disability are given below.

Café Kaffegal

The café is operated by the association of *ChangeMakers*, which aims to find jobs for mentally vulnerable people. The café is staffed by a mix of volunteers and employees who are mentally vulnerable. It also has two persons employed part-time on ordinary terms and conditions. An underlying principle is that guests should not be able to determine who



is who, which is therefore part of the inclusion and communication strategy applied when encountering customers. In addition to this café, *ChangeMakers* also runs a website and graphic design enterprise. Commercially, the café breaks even without receiving any public support.

TV-Glad

TV-Glad started in 1999 as the first TV station in the world for, with and by developmentally impaired persons. This enterprise focuses on the freedom of speech, employment and acceptance of developmentally impaired persons in Danish society. Since its inception, the enterprise has expanded its scope of work with a vocational school offering cooking, design and other courses. The work is performed on the developmentally impaired persons' own terms, but everybody is expected to do his or her best and is offered professional support and guidance according to need. *TV-Glad* is operated as a foundation, which continues to expand its activities. Currently the foundation is selling its concept around the world.

Specialisterne

Specialisterne is an IT consultancy designed to enable persons with an autism spectrum disorder or similar challenges to utilise their special characteristics of being detail orientated and detail conscious in their jobs as IT consultants.² They do so through training and individual clarification programmes after which the best qualified candidates are transferred to the commercial division of the enterprise. Some employees are seconded to other companies, others provide consultancy services from their own offices located in-house. *Specialisterne* is operated by a foundation whose purpose is to set up 1 million workplaces globally for persons with an autism spectrum disorder.

Allehånde Køkken

Allehånde Køkken is another social enterprise. It employs and trains persons with a hearing impairment as chefs. Young people, whether hearing or deaf, are trained as chefs on an equal footing, but *Allehånde Køkken* offers traineeships to person with a hearing disability, who may otherwise experience difficulties in finding such a position. The enterprise also supports persons with a hearing disability throughout their full training period by having an ongoing dialogue with the school and by building bridges with potential employers when they have finished their training. Otherwise it can be hard for members of this target group to find employment in this field.³

2 specialisterne.com/dk

3 www.allehaande.dk

Telehandelshuset

Telehandelshuset is a co-operative enterprise offering training and employment for persons with a visual disability. The enterprise sells telemarketing services provided by employees whose sharpened hearing compensates for their lack of sight, enabling them to provide qualified services to private and public clients.

■ ■ ■ Conclusion

The labour market involvement of excluded individuals and groups to perform specific tasks creates social value and social change for the relevant target group through the building of social capital⁴ and empowerment.⁵

Labour market inclusion may contribute to social capital building by the creation of trust, norms and networks between those involved at a workplace to facilitate coordination and collaboration, to the mutual benefit of both employees and the employer.⁶

Social enterprises operated with a specific objective offer an advantageous framework for rethinking employment initiatives for specific target groups to make it possible to deploy their specific competencies while accommodating their individual challenges at inclusive workplaces, as they can take other considerations into account than public authorities and private enterprises can.

4 Social capital in this context means bridging social capital, see Putnam, R.D. 1993 "Social Capital and Space", *European Urban and Regional Studies* 9(2).

5 The understanding of the concept of empowerment is based on the tradition developed by Paulo Freires. For a new interpretation, see Hvinden, B. & Halvorsen, R.S. 1996 "Empowerment and Self-organisation. How to prevent a gap between ideals and practical achievements?"; the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Sociology and Political Science; Andersen, J. & Fotel, T.N. (2003): "Kampen om byens rum", a chapter of Andersen et al. (2003): "Empowerment i storbyens rum: et sosialvidenskabeligt perspektiv". Copenhagen: The publishing house of Hans Reitzel.

6 Levin, R. 1995 "Beyond Democracy: The Politics of Empowerment", an essay included in Calleri, A., Cullenberg, S. & Biewener, C. (eds.): "Marxism in the Postmodern Age". New York: The Guilford Press.

It is an advantage of social enterprises that they have close contact with the relevant target group as it is usually easier for them to involve relevant stakeholders in finding a proper solution. This makes it possible to pursue an overall approach that relates to the life situation of each individual. Social enterprises often consider individual challenges other than the individual challenges directly related to the workplace, for example by helping employees with their personal budgets and contacting social authorities.

Trust between users and suppliers of welfare services is essential for the solution of social problems as users are more confident in describing their needs and challenges in an atmosphere of trust and dialogue. Trust helps suppliers or employers gain relevant knowledge about the needs of the target group, which can be used to maintain the individual members of the target group in the labour force or take them a step closer to employment.

Social enterprises are not part of the public system and can therefore approach the target group in a manner different to public authorities. This leads to the possibility of building relationships based on trust between social enterprises and their target groups, which can effectively have an impact on the alignment of supply and demand of welfare services when suppliers gain essential information from the target group.

The living conditions and drive of marginalised groups may be improved by making use of these people's personal capacities, resources, confidence and skills in the labour market, thereby giving them greater influence on their working day, both as individuals and collectively. This is where the employment initiatives of social enterprises may be of great significance.

The enterprise *MultiTaske*, which manufactures bags of discarded material, such as bicycle tubes, employs vulnerable individuals by structuring their work in a manner in which it is possible for members of the target group to take part in the daily production process, for example through individually agreed working hours, support for personal financial planning, the possibility of getting wake-up calls in the morning and physical training during working hours.⁷

7 multitaske.dk/en-anderledes-virksomhed



When social enterprises manage to create financially sustainable organisations, the employment initiatives of social enterprises may create both economic and social value for the individual enterprise, vulnerable groups and society.

The respect paid to persons balancing on the edge of the labour market and their own self-esteem yields a return when they contribute to society in a meaningful manner by being part of a working community. This respectful attitude towards those in a weaker position often results in fewer sick days and hospitalisations, less addiction and better family relations, which will also have an impact on the macroeconomy. Most important of all is, however, that the well-being of the individual citizen improves.

An example of a Social Enterprise - *Huset Venture*

Inger Steen Moeller

Huset Venture is a social enterprise. Our purpose is to create jobs for people with a disability. We have workplaces in different parts of Denmark and it is our aim to work all over the country. We want to create real jobs on market conditions.

An enterprise like ours has a lot of challenges. One of them is that the Danish law in some cases is a prohibition for us. Currently there are people working with creating new legislation in our field. Another challenge is that we have a double bottom line, as we are focused on creating both economic and social value.

It is very important for us to work under the same conditions as all other enterprises. We want to sell services and products at market terms. It means that our products need to have the same quality as all other products and we must be able to make our deliveries at the promised time.

As we are dealing with people who have a lot of difficulties it is necessary for us to use extraordinary social efforts to create the jobs and to keep the employees at the job. Because of this we are not able to make profit and we are dependent on funds from the state. This is a condition we have in common with a lot of other social enterprises, but not all, as the financial condition depends very much on the health and ability of the employees.

As it is very important for us to function similarly to the ordinary labour market we do not help our employees with their personal budgets and their contact with the social authorities. We did that in the beginning but it took too much of our working time.

The first *Huset Venture* facility was built in 1999. Currently there are four houses with about 150 employees spread all over the country and we are still expanding. We are living in a world where the demands on the labour market are getting higher and higher. In order to get and to keep a job you have to be ready to change, to be innovative, and to show flexibility all the time. Lots of people are not able to fulfil these conditions. Because of that, it is in my opinion necessary to build up enterprises like *Huset Venture* and other kinds of social enterprises, where people with a disability can work, earn their own money, and be able to live a decent life.

An IT Innovation to Support the Work Competence of People with Reading/ Spelling Difficulties

Kaj Andersen

■ ■ ■ Dyslexia

Dyslexia can be difficult to get a grip on. Everybody knows somebody with dyslexia, but only few people know what dyslexia really is, and research within this area has only been taking place for around one hundred years. In an article regarding grown-ups with dyslexia, it is therefore natural to pin down the term. The term *dyslexia* is used in connection with persons who have great difficulties in reading and spelling. Usually, dyslexia is discovered when you start learning to read, and the reading difficulties last for the rest of your life. Dyslexia is often compared to riding a bike with the wind in your face; you make progress, but it requires a lot of resources, and you are often tempted to get off.

In this ever-changing world, companies see very different requirements, possibilities and challenges as a consequence of technological development and globalisation, and individual employees for sure adapt to this development in different ways and have different feelings about it. However, one thing is common to most people: they will have to become even better at picking up texts in such formats as SMS and email. In addition to the enhancement of the ability of picking up texts, many employees face increasing pressure to develop their competence in other fields of life too. However, the acquisition of texts applies to everyone.

In this situation, what does an individual with dyslexia do? What does the company s/he works for do? What does the society do – and who/what is the society in this context? My suggestion is that the companies of the future will become schools. They will become competence development centres. It has been documented that very good training results can be achieved if the training takes place at the work place.

In a meeting at the Vestas Wind System A/S in March 2008, it was decided to organise a project targeted at employees with reading/spelling difficulties. The reason for this decision was that Vestas Wind System A/S does not believe that the public system is capable of treating grown-ups with reading/spelling difficulties equally with regard to assistive technology.

■ ■ ■ **The aim of the Vestas Dyslexia Project**

The purpose of the Vestas Dyslexia Project, which has been implemented in all our factories, can be crystallised through the following three guidelines:

1. We wish to elevate the reading and spelling skills of employees within Vestas Wind Systems A/S through the use of assistive information technology and relevant local training.
2. To a great extent, another purpose is to increase knowledge about persons with dyslexia among a larger audience. Only through increased knowledge we can dispel all the myths and prejudices against people with reading/spelling difficulties.
3. Naturally, one important purpose of the project is also to motivate our colleagues with these difficulties to **want** clarification of their competencies and to **want** further education, and at the same time to want to continue their working life with Vestas Wind Systems A/S.

*“It should be just as natural to use reading
compensatory tools as to use a calculator.”*

The ideological background for these guidelines is the moral that we must ensure equality among employees in all areas. In other words, everyone should have the same opportunities to get help corresponding to their personal and work needs. Furthermore, we must ensure that everyone gets equal opportunities for training. Thus, the final objective of the project is that the individual employee becomes independent and self-sufficient with regard to written documentation. So, it is important that the IT system involved makes it possible to have a text read aloud so that the user is able to acquire knowledge without asking a colleague.



I believe that making texts available without demanding ponderous reading training is the way forward. It should be just as natural to use reading compensatory tools as to use a calculator. Getting access to the written universe will motivate people to gain further education for the first time on much more equal terms than previously.

■ ■ ■ Preliminary arrangements

Before becoming a participant in the project, each candidate must pass a dyslexia test to evaluate if s/he will be able to benefit from the assistive technology. After that, s/he will attend two courses of six and ten days duration respectively, one day once a fortnight. The first course is primarily IT- based and its purpose is to introduce the programmes. The other course is an advanced course in programme learning, and includes training in Danish understanding. There are six participants on each course, and the courses are held by the Adult Education Center (*VUC*) at the Vestas sites.

On the very first day of the course, the participants get an IT rucksack containing a PC with the aid programmes, a scanner, headphones and a USB key. The participants can keep the backpack for as long as they are employed with Vestas and are free to use it privately at home. Moreover, to assure the continuance of participation of the target group, 25 shop stewards have been trained as mentors in connection with the present project. Their tasks include following up and talking to the participants after each course, and thus to ensure that they stay motivated to continue the training. This method has turned out to be very efficient and the courses are usually completed by all participants.

■ ■ ■ The shop stewards

The performance of the shop stewards is the crucial factor in getting persons with reading/spelling difficulties to admit their problems. Many stories are told about shop stewards who have spotted a person with dyslexia and how they, in the right way, have been able to get that person to admit it. And that is what it is all about: to have the persons come out from where they are hiding; behind empty words, paraphrases and displacement activities. Of

course, these persons have a need to protect themselves against the bullying and harassment to which many of them have been exposed for many years. They have remarkable experience in finding ways to avoid being confronted with their disability. They have used a lot of energy avoiding receiving written messages, tasks, information and filling out papers.

By participating in the project, they can focus their energy on the right places, namely on becoming better at reading and writing, and consequently getting a better life and success in pursuit of their dreams. The shop stewards have been equipped with a set of tools making them capable of helping their colleagues in the best way possible. Co-operation with the educational institutions¹ must be based on the needs of the shop stewards and the needs of the persons with reading/spelling difficulties.

■ ■ ■ Coaching

In addition to coaching techniques, the shop stewards have to know how to set the frames for a mutually equal conversation. All conversations have some kind of built-in power structure and therefore it is important for the frames of equality to be explicitly set. It is essential to recognise a setting where a conversation is equal, and to distinguish it from one where the shop steward uses power. The wrong kind of discussion is characterised by the participants trying to convince one another with arguments and contentions. Usually, such a discussion has a winner and a loser and, as we are dealing with “experienced losers”, this is not the way to go. Therefore the shop steward has to know how to elevate the discussion to the next level – to a dialogue where the other party gets more space.

The task of the coach is about helping the person with reading/spelling dif-

¹ Vestas is cooperating in the education of dyslexic individuals with the Adult Education Centre (VUC) in Denmark, an institution approved by the Danish government to teach dyslexic persons. Co-operation with Vestas is an agreement that Vestas and VUC has entered together. Teaching takes place at Vestas factories, so that those who are being taught feel familiar with the topics. This kind of co-operation also ensures that, if someone feels that s/he does is not getting the right training, s/he can talk to the shop steward. The shop steward can immediately tell me about the problem, and I can contact the Adult Education Centre to get the problem solved. I also work with VUC to develop new programmes for the backpack.



difficulties to build up his/her own resources and first of all to want a change, and that is most likely to take place through dialogue. For a person with reading/spelling difficulties, the process will begin with a break from diversions such as “I have forgotten my glasses” and from saying “no” to worrying tasks containing reading/writing activities. The ultimate goal is to get rid of humiliating situations where colleagues and friends “act as a teacher”, and the obligation to tell about the reading/spelling problems over and over again.

Fortunately, many people have already escaped from a life with such limitations and are now living a life of maturity. Today, 500 persons with reading/spelling difficulties have stepped forward, with help from our shop stewards, and enrolled for training, and they have all received an IT rucksack. By the way, Vestas produces the IT rucksacks themselves.²

■ ■ ■ The share of company and colleagues

The company and its culture are a central element in the project. As in the case of Vestas, management must back up the project so that everyone in the company knows how the new winds are blowing. Different councils/committees, etc. within the company must support the project and show through action that they take the reading/spelling difficulties of the employees seriously.

The culture in a company depends on all the employees and their behaviour, and therefore the attitude of colleagues towards persons with reading/spelling difficulties is of great importance. Often it is the colleagues whom those with reading/spelling difficulties seek for advice when problems arise with

² All teaching in the dyslexia project is paid for by the Danish government. Vestas manufactures the IT backpacks, because it is a way of saving a lot of money. Before we started to make the backpacks ourselves, we bought them from companies that delivered them to schools in Denmark. Vestas paid €2,600 per backpack, but nowadays when we produce them, the cost is just €1,100. That means a significant amount of money as Vestas pays all expenses for the project. The backpacks we are making have been tested by an independent IT distributor, and the result is that they are better than those which we used to buy externally. Vestas sees the investment in this project as an investment that will pay itself back as production errors are minimised. This will decrease the need to fix products that have already been delivered to customers.

messages, the operation of a PC, and other technical equipment during daily work.

■ ■ ■ Two case studies

Next we will present the stories of two people out of many who have improved their life because of their involvement in the Vestas dyslexic project. It is our hope that these cases will exemplify the advantage of the project for the career opportunities of those who have dyslexia.

Willy was 45 years old. He had never had an education but, after receiving an IT backpack and consequently participating in the two teaching rounds, Willy was encouraged to start training to become a skilled employee. Willy attended a technical school on an equal footing with non-dyslexics.



Throughout the process Willy got top marks in line with his peers. Nowadays he is working at a Vestas Wind turbine factory doing the same job as the others (without dyslexia) do, because now he can read the work instructions and therefore makes no errors. Willy is very proud that he can do the same job as the non-dyslexics, and Vestas appreciates his efforts.

The other person we will talk about in detail is Ricci, a 25 year-old man. Ricci is working at Vestas Blades Factory. He has always been a popular employee, but because of dyslexia he had not been able to participate in any work involving written assignments. This changed when Ricci participated in the Vestas Dyslexia Project. Since then he has convinced his supervisors that he is now as able as his non-dyslexic colleagues to participate in tasks with written assignments. The ability to deal with written language has significantly enhanced Ricci's career. He is currently employed as a quality inspector, because he is capable of performing the required tasks as well as any



other quality inspectors. The management of Vestas is pleased with Ricci's work.

There are a variety of similar cases where people have been encouraged to participate in new tasks in the factories where they work, because dealing with written texts is no longer a problem. From this point of view, the Vestas Dyslexia Project can undoubtedly be called a success. This project hopes to serve as a model that many other companies could follow. The Vestas Dyslexia Project aims to demonstrate the benefit to both employees and the company that can be achieved by solving literacy problems.

■ ■ ■ Change of focus in dyslexia training

It is becoming generally accepted that an IT aid for reading/spelling has a great compensating effect and that information technology should be a natural part of reading training. Smartphone technology is quite advanced with apps³ and this is of great help to persons with dyslexia.

To conclude, the objective of the project is to develop a new way of thinking regarding the schooling of people with dyslexia, and to offer concrete training to improve *the combined reading/writing and IT competencies* of the employees. This qualification, in turn, improves their specific job competence giving a full display of their skills, and also their opportunities to be part of society on equal terms with everyone else.

³ App means a program for smartphone or iPad for example, where you can talk to your smartphone or iPad, which then writes the recorded speech without spelling for the dyslexic. You can also record what you wish to write in your own language, and then translate it to another language. Furthermore, the person you speak with can then record his message on the smartphone in his own language, and then it will be translated into your language and spoken by the machine so you can understand what is being said.

ESTONIA

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The employment level of people with disabilities is low in Estonia. Creation of services and help to get a job has been taking place for some 20 years, after the former system of sheltered workshops for especially blind people was abandoned. Slowly but steadily are new the forms of assistance and possibilities of finding a job, either in the open labour market or in a protected environment, appearing. This development needs to be backed up by a solid level of social protection, accessible environment, and positive attitudes.

The European Union support via the European Social Fund is available to improve the situation. Civil society stakeholders together with the public sector have encouraged companies and authorities to hire people with disabilities by awarding them the labels *H.E.A. / Hea Ettevõtte Autasu* (or 'disability-friendly employer') and *Töötame Koos* (or, 'let's work together'). Further legislative support for employment of people with disabilities is due.

The articles here will present an overview of three different services. Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre is a strong and well-funded organization with many possibilities to address the shortcomings. Saaremaa Educational Centre and Estonian Agrenska Foundation are smaller, but strongly working with the task of helping their users to get a relevant and high-quality assistance.

Disabled People and Entrepreneurship in Estonia

Leonora Kraus

■ ■ ■ History of Saaremaa Educational Centre in a nutshell

Saaremaa Educational Centre, an Non-governmental organization, was founded by the Saare county government in 1992 to serve as an adult training centre. In those days, regional adult training centres were founded in many counties to improve the country from Soviet times when adult training centres were in ministries in Tallinn.

The Centre started and is still working as an adult job training and popular education institution. It has cooperated with labour market institutions, communes and enterprises, and organized a multitude of courses for unemployed people (entrepreneurship, language courses, computer training, psychology, log house building, pottery, customer service and selling, etc).

During the early years, disabled people were not included in our target group, because we had no experience in this field. In 1992-1994 we learned about adult education system in Sweden, Denmark and Finland, and had a chance to see the training of disabled people in Sweden. However, since 2002 we have had some experience in the training of disabled people in the Saare county. Our first course was computer training for people with visual impairments. In those days, there was a lack of equipment for such training, and we had no other choice but to use computer-compatible magnifying glasses! But it worked and the participants were satisfied.

In 2004, we held our first entrepreneurship course for disabled people (with different diagnoses). Some of those with visual impairments had previously learned massage, and after the entrepreneurship course they started their own companies. One blind woman hesitated to start her own business and wanted to work in a spa. But as the managers did not know how to deal with blind people and how the customers would feel, they did not recruit her.

■ ■ ■ **The case of Jüri**

One of the participants of the course was Jüri, a man who had been paralysed in a motorcycle accident in 1980, and since then had been confined to a wheelchair. In 2004, we met Jüri on the entrepreneurship course. He looked very active, open and friendly, but we knew that after the accident he had gone through psychologically hard times (stress, depression, pains). At the very beginning there were some negotiations with labour market officers about the possibilities of giving him the course in his home, but due to good work by a social worker he decided to come out and learn with the others. And since then his life has changed.

Today Jüri has been running his own limited partnership company, *Sakadak*, for eight years. This company has employed six people with mental and physical disabilities. Jüri gets a subsidy of €72.80 per month from the government for each worker for whom he provides supported employment, and he is also allowed to pay slightly lower social costs. *Sakadak* produces wood handicraft, and also other services suitable for the employees (chopping and sawing of firewood, redecoration, etc). Jüri is a real social entrepreneur who has shown that disabled people can do good work and even manage their own company. His company makes no profit, but he is happy to go to work every day and give work to his peers. In Saaremaa, we often meet him at handicraft markets, where he actively sells his products, and his work is acknowledged by the Saare county government.

■ ■ ■ **The case of Peeter**

To take another example, Peeter was a 28-year-old man who ended up in a wheelchair for the rest of his life as a consequence of a motorcycle accident. At that time he was a university student. The only way for him to get a job was to start his own company and manage it lying on a bed and using a telephone and computer. He was, however, strongly motivated to do that with the help of his family.

”Our teacher went to him and taught him when he was lying on the bed and writing with his computer.”

As it was difficult for him and his family to attend the entrepreneurship course in Kuressaare (a town about 40 km away from their home), our teacher went to him and taught him when he was lying on the bed and writing with his computer. He created a business plan and started a company that offered the sawing and chopping of firewood. The government supported him with an enterprise allowance which he invested in a chopping machine, so he was able to offer work to one jobseeker and additionally to himself.

■ ■ ■ The case of Igor

In an ESF project called *Development of islands handicraft* in 2004-2005, we focused on the disabled and unemployed people in the Saare and Hiiu counties. To successfully conduct a project involving so many disabled people, we cooperated closely with the Saaremaa Chamber of Disabled People. We had different kinds of handicraft and entrepreneurship courses, and during the project we founded two handicraft co-operatives and opened two handicraft shops in Kärđla and Kuressaare. In Kuressaare the co-operative and the shop are still in business. Some members of the target group also started their own businesses.

Igor, a man with slight mental disability, is our third example of entrepreneurship among people with disabilities in Estonia. Igor studied woodwork and metalwork, and wanted to have his own business. He created a good business plan, got financial support from two different institutions, and bought equipment and a car. I talked to the social worker in his home commune, and she simply did not believe that Igor would have been able to start and manage a business. But against all odds Igor is still working and running his business. He visits us once in a while to ask for advice and to talk about his business problems.

■ ■ ■ HAPECO – An international project to promote employment of the disabled

Those three examples above were about men with strong willpower and family support. They needed no help other than financial support and some professional training to start their business. However, in most cases far more

support is required. In 2005-2008 we were involved as a partner in a joint project *Handicapped People Employed in Co-operatives* (HAPECO). In this project, we had an opportunity to get acquainted with our international partners from Spain and France and experience their way of working with disabled people. Project partners from Estonia were from five counties (Saare, Hiiu, Viljandi, Järva and Põlva). According to the original project plan, the target group was supposed to consist of 150 people. However, it was very difficult to find them at first, because many of the potential participants did not understand how the project could help them. We cooperated with local communes, labour market institutions and disabled people's roof organisations to find participants. In this way, we finally managed to gather a total of 109 disabled people from all over Estonia, who were interested in participating in project activities. 87 % of them had physical disabilities, others mental disabilities.

As most of them had been out of the labour market for several years, the first course in every region was 120-hour adaptation course called "How to be successful in the labour market. The themes of this course were as follows:

1. Self-analysis to find out personal abilities and interests, weaknesses and the inner power that will help in finding a suitable job
2. Basic introduction to the labour market: its demands and tools that can help with entry (writing CVs, handling job interviews)
3. Effective learning and its key competences
4. Communication skills
5. Belief systems and how to get rid of stiff beliefs

One goal of the project was to find jobs in co-operatives, and to reach that goal we organized a 120-hour course in entrepreneurship. The themes included legislation, marketing, economy, computer training, business ideas and how to create a business plan. We also planned to establish a social cooperative, so the next 80-hour course was *Cooperative Entrepreneurship*, focusing on the foundation and management of a cooperative, and personnel management.

These training courses raised such enthusiasm in every region that several groups were formed among participants who were interested in founding a cooperative. Each group created a business plan and presented it to the

committee of project coordinators, which in turn decided to support these enterprises financially (€2,556 per applicant) at the beginning. The project coordinators also offered professional training for some groups, depending on the field of activity. In Saare county, for example, where four women set up a play group for children, a nanny's course was organised. In Hiiu, Järva and Põlva counties, the committee provided different kinds of handicraft courses.

A non-profit cooperative was felt to be the most suitable form of social enterprise at first, but this option turned out to be impossible, because while the project was still running, legislation in this field was changed. So, the only legal form we could choose was NGO. Thus, six organisations were founded as a result of the project:

- 1.ABIMIX in Viljandi county (landscaping, different home services)
- 2.AEKO PIKO in Põlva county (handicraft, landscaping)
- 3.NGO Workshop of Disabled People of Läänemaa (handicraft)
- 4.SAARPIKO in Saare county (play group for children, birthdays, handicraft, home services)
- 5.NÄPIKO in Järva county (handicraft, landscaping)
- 6.SIPEKO in Hiiu county (handicraft)

These organizations gave work to 20-30 people. Project coordinators acted as mentors during the project period and advised the participants in solving their problems whenever something emerged: troubles with relations in the group, financial and legal issues, etc. In some counties the leadership constituted the biggest problem. We preferred to find leaders among the group members, but occasionally the wrong choices were made. When projects ended without help or support, only good leaders could guarantee the survival of their cooperatives, and others faced a serious risk of failing. In addition, the financial crisis started in 2008. Today, in 2013, four organizations still exist but the enthusiasm has declined, the project has finished and there is no support from outside.

■ ■ ■ **Current state of progress and future prospects**

HAPECO, Handicapped People Employed in Co-operatives, was the first project in Estonia to demonstrate that disabled people are indeed able to create and run their own businesses. Although social entrepreneurship was not a priority in Estonian politics in those days, the project was financed. In return, an additional aim of the project was to apply the results to mainstream politics. Therefore the Estonian president T. H. Ilves, who visited a disabled people's handicraft shop in Hiiu county and highly appreciated this activity, was informed about the project in detail. The project coordinators also highlighted the necessity to change the law in order to facilitate or at least legalise the possibility of setting up social cooperatives (firms) and getting financial support for them from the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Estonian Parliament.

A project offers a chance to use complex methods to support the aim of disabled people to enter the labour market. But when the project ends and there is no support available from outside, it is difficult for a nascent career to survive. There are still various obstacles for disabled people in having a job in Estonian enterprises:

1. The prevalent attitudes in society at large still reflect Soviet times when people with disabilities had extremely few possibilities to work. Only blind and deaf people had some jobs with certain manufactures.
2. Employers lack information and experience about disabled workers and their abilities, and they have no methods of working with them.
3. Lack of motivation to recruit people with disabilities. Many people wonder *why* they should employ disabled people.
4. It is not common in Estonian enterprises to have mentors and coaches, or to train people for such work.

Having now acquired long-term experience in the working and counselling of the long-term unemployed and disabled people, we can say that there is no place for disabled people in such companies where the main interest is to earn profit. To conclude, establishing and supporting socially-oriented firms is strongly needed.

Employment for Mentally Disabled Young Adults in Rural Estonia

Krislin Padjus

■ ■ ■ Introduction

In 2003, now already 10 years ago, the Estonian Agrenska Foundation was established by the University of Tartu, Tartu University Hospitals, the Estonian Chamber of Disabled People, the Ågrenska Centre in Sweden and Stenströms Skjortfabrik Estonia Ltd. It is thus a unique setup, with private and public bodies along with civil society stakeholders co-operating cross-borderly. It is Estonia co-operating with Sweden, in a permanent way for the benefit of Estonian society. The purpose of the Foundation is to make life easier for families who have a disabled child. Children indeed grow up so, after school, young adults with disabilities need to become active participants in society by contributing to it. That is why the Estonian Agrenska Foundation also deals with employment issues, and why the Foundation has established the Tammistu Family Centre. It is located 15 km from Tartu, the second largest city in Estonia, but at the same time is in a very rural environment.

■ ■ ■ Tammistu Family Centre – why and how?

Tammistu Manor is being developed into a training and recreation centre for families with disabled children. The main reasons to choose Tammistu to serve as the seat of the activities of the Foundation were as follows. First of all, the centre should *not* be located close to a hospital, because we wanted it to be more independent and have no influence from the hospital. Secondly, the place should have some cultural or natural added value, because this gives the best prerequisites for potential further development. Both these requirements were met at Tammistu, but the poor condition of the buildings, distance from the city and location in the countryside in generally sparsely populated Estonia have hindered the rapid development of the project. Anyhow, during ten years of development, much has been achieved.

The restoration of the main building, which had not been in use for some 20 years, started in 2006 with the ordering of the reconstruction drawings from a top-quality international company. The task was to adapt the precious piece of real estate for accommodation, therapy and catering in terms of careful renovation of the historical manor house, the main building on the property. An additional requirement was to make it fully accessible for people with disabilities. A centre for families with disabled children was very needed and the families were really looking forward to being able to use the centre fully.

“It is thus a unique setup, with private and public bodies along with civil society stakeholders co-operating cross-borderly.”

■ ■ ■ **Brief history of Tammistu Manor**

Tammistu Manor was mentioned in literature for the first time in 1584. The current main building was erected in the 1850s when Paul von Krüdener was the owner. The golden age of the manor passed before the First World War in possession of Gustav von Rathlef. After WWI, the war hero General Julius Kuperjanov’s widow Alice Kuperjanov became the owner and, after her, ownership was transferred to the lawyer Oskar Rütli, who had been elected to the 1st Russian State Duma from southern Estonia (Livonia).

In 1944, Tammistu housed a war hospital, and after the war it became a home for the elderly disabled. When that was moved elsewhere in the early 1980s, a local collective farm intended to renovate the manor to serve as a kindergarten with catering facilities. This was never accomplished.

From 1983 until 2006, when the current renovation began, the building was empty and the park was completely neglected. All remaining buildings were without glass in the windows. The Estonian Agrenska Foundation has by now refurbished most of the main building and many of the outhouses, and cleaned up the park. This was done mainly by voluntary work and with the help of donations, Estonian State programmes, and Nordic and EU programmes. The ultimate aim is to restore the whole manor making it accessible for people with disabilities, while preserving as much history as possible.



View of the Tammistu Family Centre in the summer of 2011

■ ■ ■ Employment and activities for mentally disabled youth

In 2007 and 2008, the Foundation implemented a European Social Fund project *Training makes master*, which focused on practical work training for young adults with disabilities. The Tammistu Family Centre served as a brilliant location for different activities because of the large park, where various activities can be practised, in particular gardening and building maintenance.

2008 brought co-operation with the Tartu rural municipality, and a permanent employment training unit was opened at the centre. At the beginning, the unit was located on the ground floor of the main building, offering some 5–6 users year-round activities three days a week – mainly in handicrafts, but during the summer months also outdoors activities in the park.

In 2009–2011, another European Social Fund project was implemented. This project yielded a handicraft workshop on the ground floor. The participants could simply move in with the equipment that the Foundation had already purchased. The ESF project *Self-made, well-made! Workshops for people*

with disabilities in Tartu county offered training possibilities for even more users, and they could also try new activities and strengthen already acquired ones.

More improvements were to come. By the end of 2010, with help from the *Norwegian/European Economic Area regional development programme*, a training kitchen was opened at Tammistu Family Centre. This kitchen brought possibilities for training in cooking, catering and kitchen equipment usage. This facility enables even more young adults to get training at Tammistu. Further possibilities for personal consultation, advice and support were provided during 2012, and two special educators were hired.

■ ■ ■ **Currently running programmes**

The Estonian Agrenska Foundation has four target groups for which we provide our services:

1. Juveniles from Kroonuaia School (educational special needs school) who are still attending school
2. Juveniles who have graduated from Kroonuaia School or other educational special needs schools
3. Young adults with special needs who are sitting at home without opportunities to enter the open labour market by themselves
4. Adults with disabilities who have been sitting at home for years and are alienated from the work routine

The services are designed for the special needs of each group. Work exercise during the summer is targeted at juveniles from Kroonuaia School and those who have already graduated from a special needs school. This service is usually financed by an EU project. The activities are carried out in the big manor park and consist mainly of gardening and maintenance work.

A more complicated task is to arrange work exercise programmes through a rehabilitation system for adults with disabilities who are sitting at home without access to the open labour market. These people perform simple work exercises at Tammistu Manor Park and in the textile-handicraft workshop. They are learning to work, or learning to work *again*, and building a work-

routine. This service usually contains consultation sessions with a social worker, special educator, psychologist or physiotherapist.

For those who have already been in our work exercises during summer or in our work exercise programme, we arrange work practice through the Unemployment Insurance Fund (*Töötukassa*). This work practice lasts for four months and the trainee starts practising the most interesting and suitable work for him/her (gardening, kitchen help, household work and cleaning, maintenance, handicraft).

Working with a support person through the Unemployment Insurance Fund is an alternative for those people who have successfully passed the work practice stage. Working with a support person lasts for 12 months and the Foundation makes a contract with each person who starts working. The Estonian Agrenska Foundation gets an amount of money every month (for 12 months altogether) to pay the support person's salary. The contract with a person starting as a kitchen worker, garden helper or cleaner needs to be open-ended. After one year, they should continue working without the support person, but for many people with disabilities a support person is still a necessity after the year of support. At the moment the Estonian Agrenska Foundation has three contracts with people with special needs.



Users of the Centre like to come to Tammistu, working in the park

■ ■ ■ **Aspiring visibility in society**

As the employment possibilities for people with disabilities, be it in the open labour market or in the supported employment system in Estonia, are still not sufficiently developed, the Estonian Agrenska Foundation has been seeking possibilities to improve visibility and awareness of the topic in Estonian society.

In 2009–2010, the Foundation conducted a project called *Right to Work*, co-funded by the Norwegian/ European Economic Area NGO fund. The project promoted the development of services for people with disabilities – in particular in the field of supported employment. The aim was to highlight the need for the possibilities of supported employment for those who cannot participate in the labour market without external help. Providing work for people with disabilities must be considered a good business case, ensuring that the target group does not just become recipients of social services. Raising awareness of these issues was the main focus of the project.

The Tammistu Family Centre with all its activities is a unique initiative. The need for more initiatives providing similar support for families with disabled children is great in Estonian society. The Estonian Agrenska Foundation is therefore seeking wide recognition and support in society. There have been several activities to raise public awareness, which have emphasised the international nature of the Estonian Agrenska Foundation.

■ ■ ■ **Long term co-operation with ASVO Nøtterøy in Norway**

For several years, ASVO Nøtterøy and the Estonian Agrenska Foundation have been partners in co-operation. ASVO Nøtterøy is a municipally-owned company of Nøtterøy in Vesfold county, Norway. The aim of the company is to offer training and work to people with disabilities in the municipality. Co-operation with Estonia started as far back as 2001.

Since 2007, joint employment events have been organised in Estonia. They typically last for one week. Another partner in this co-operation is the Tartu NGO *Independent Living*. This organization promotes supported living and employment for people with special needs. The co-operation has proved to

be invaluable, as many ideas for new services, methods and solutions have resulted from it. The joint employment weeks have been a great tool to raise awareness. This event has brought a chance to explore possibilities for new services through mutual learning. The Estonian partners have learned from Norwegians a great deal about labelling the products, planning the activities and recognising the need for skilful guidance in employment issues. The Norwegian partners have got ideas about arts and handicraft, which previously were not the subject of their focus.

Still, the most important benefit of the co-operation is that the clients of the organisations can discuss and exchange their personal experiences. Some participants take the step of speaking English, which they were too shy to try before, and some of them learn new practical skills. It is essential to feel mutual interest in the co-operation – you must always be able to trust your partner and to make efforts to develop the relationship further.



Visitors from ASVO Nøtterøy summerof 2010 during lunchbreak

■ ■ ■ **Everything is possible if you have the guts!**
– **Story of Ragnar**

Ragnar is 23 years old, and has a rare disorder (*phenylketonuria*), comorbid autism and an intellectual disability. Our first contact with Ragnar was in the summer of 2007 through Kroonuaia School. The Estonian Agrenska Foundation was managing a European Social Fund project *Training makes master*, and Ragnar was participating in the work exercise project three times a week for the whole summer. Simple gardening, painting and maintenance work was practised at the Tammistu Manor Park. Ragnar attended our work exercise projects for three summers and, after graduating from Kroonuaia School in 2009, he went to Vana-Antsla Trade School to learn cleaning services. He did all his compulsory practice periods at Tammistu Manor and got plenty of know-how. Ragnar graduated from Vana-Antsla Trade School in 2012, and after the graduation he started yet another period of work practice at Tammistu, this time through the Unemployment Insurance Fund service. He did his work practice in cleaning services to build up a work routine, learn how to stick to his agreements and learn how to be responsible for his work. Today he works as a cleaner at the Genetics Centre of Tartu University. He lives with his family in Tartu.

■ ■ ■ **Some important webpages for the Estonian Agrenska Foundation**

Estonian Agrenska Foundation www.agrenska.ee
Ågrenka Family Centre in Sweden www.agrenska.se
University of Tartu www.ut.ee
Tartu University Hospitals www.kliinikum.ee
Stenströms AB www.stenstroms.com
Estonian Chamber of Disabled People www.epikoda.ee
ASVO Nøtterøy Municipal Employment Company www.asvo.no
NGO Independent Living www.iseseisev-elu.ee
Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs www.sm.ee
Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund www.tootukassa.ee
Tartu County visitors portal www.visittartu.com
Tartu City webpages www.tartu.ee

Supporting Students in Finding a Job at Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre

Ulvi Mölder



■ ■ ■ About us

The Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre was founded in 1995 and falls within the scope of administration of the Ministry of Social Affairs. The Astangu Centre is a unique institution in Estonia that offers rehabilitation services and various courses to adults with special needs. The aim of the Centre's team is to prepare students for work by developing their work skills.

The cornerstone of the activity is to proceed in accordance with the abilities and needs of each person. Approximately 130 students study at the Astangu Centre at the moment. Our target group includes people with a slight or moderate intellectual disability, congenital and/or chronic health damage, hearing disability, mental health disorder (including autism), or learning difficulties, and people who have experienced brain or spinal cord trauma. The students can acquire work and professional skills in the following subjects: woodwork, baking, handicrafts, home service and information tech-

nology. The courses last from one to three years. Those persons with special needs, who need to develop their social skills, choose a profession or receive professional support to cope with life after brain damage, can participate in prevocational courses. Rehabilitation specialists at Astangu provide rehabilitation services. The rehabilitation team includes a speech therapist, a psychiatrist, psychologists, creative therapists, social workers, activity therapists, physiotherapists, activity instructors and carers. Employment Union specialists offer the students professional counselling and support.

“Determining and finding a suitable work experience placement is conducted in close co-operation with the student, the student’s vocational teacher and his or her close network.”

■ ■ ■ **Employment support**

The Employment Union was established in 2002 in response to the need for better preparation of the students for professional life. Prior to its creation, students acquired professional skills but were not ready to work or could not keep their job after graduating. Therefore, the Employment Union has taken up providing group counselling or career development lessons, and also offers individual counselling. During lessons and counselling, the focus is on various topics relating to work and working, such as professional work opportunities, demands at the work place, looking for work, behaviour at the work place or places for work practice, work legislation and labour market services. Within the framework of these lessons, the students visit companies connected with their profession. During such visits they are introduced to the work environment and thus get a better understanding of their possible future work place. Students on a prevocational course are supported in their choice of profession.

The Employment Union coordinates the search for work experience placement for all students in the work and professional study courses and draws up work experience placement documents. Determining and finding a suitable work experience placement is conducted in close co-operation with the student, the student’s vocational teacher and his or her close network. Rehabilitation specialists dealing with the student are also involved, if necessary. The abilities and skills of the client are taken into consideration when seeking a work experience placement, because the ultimate aim is to find a

suitable work experience placement within the companies near the student's home town. This will most likely increase the student's chances of later finding a job, which would not require him/her to move. During work experience placement, both the student and the employer are supported by keeping in contact with the work practice base.

Graduates from the centre are offered support in finding a job and in keeping it. After graduating, the students may return to an employment specialist in order to receive help in looking for a job or in holding their current job down.

Co-operation with employers is a constant activity throughout the process that aims to reach the set objective – to employ the student. The Employment Union has started to pay more and more attention to informing employers, since companies have realised that awareness of the possibilities of employing persons with special needs is low. Also, there is little knowledge about services and support provided by the state and misconceptions are common. Twice a year, the Employment Union organizes information events for companies at the Astangu Centre. During the events, company representatives have an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the activities of the Centre in detail. Employers also receive information about persons with special needs and their options in the labour market. Discussions about possible work places and co-operation are organized. In addition to sharing information, the aim of this informative event is to present the success stories of both the employers and the former students.

■ ■ ■ **Programme To Work with Support**

Since 2010, the graduates of the Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre have been offered even more intensive support in finding a job than before. A programme *To Work with Support* was initiated in order to serve that purpose. The aim of the programme is to find, in co-operation with various specialists, a suitable career step for the students of the Astangu Centre after they have graduated, i.e., to support the students' transfer to the open labour market, their path to further studies or special welfare services, or any other activities that correspond to their needs and possibilities in their home town.

The programme is coordinated by the Employment Union. Activities take place every year from February until the end of October. The programme is conducted by a team that may consist, for example, of a group instructor, a development discussion support person and an employment specialist. This team discusses the student's possibilities and wishes. A necessary team is selected individually for each student in order to support the student in finding a suitable job. For example, the team of a student may consist of an employment specialist and group instructor, who is normally also the vocational teacher. Another student's team may also include, in addition to the employment specialist and the group instructor, a physiotherapist, activity therapist, psychologist and social worker, depending on the student's needs.

Work with a student begins with drawing up an activity plan specifying the objective and the tasks for each specialist. Activities that will be carried out with the student are individual and depend on the student's needs. The main activities of the programme are as follows:

- Teamwork.
- Individual counselling by the employment specialist and the rehabilitation specialists. The aim is to prepare the student for leaving the centre, for work experience placement and later working life, and to determine the most suitable work for the student and, accordingly, to develop relevant work skills.
- Carrying out work testing – determining what work suits the student best, and monitoring his/her work behaviour.
- Looking for a suitable place for work experience placement.
- Work experience placement – testing studied skills at a company, acquiring new skills; introduction to an actual work environment and its requirements.
- Looking for a job that corresponds to the student's skills and abilities.
- Supporting a student on the job (those who have found employment).
- Co-operation with employers – visiting the work place, assessing it, counselling the employer.
- Counselling students who do not take up a job about the possibilities open to them (continuing education, participating in the activities of a day centre, volunteer work, etc.).
- Networking (see below).

Networking plays an important part in the programme. Specialists from other institutions who are connected with the student, such as the event organizer at the Unemployment Insurance Fund or local government social worker, are involved in the activities. There is also close co-operation with the student's friends and family. Since students come to the Astangu Centre from all over Estonia, it is very important that the specialists at the student's home and his or her family members co-operate with the centre and are ready to welcome the student back. Often the student's friends and family or the specialists working at the student's home are able to give important information that helps in the finding of a suitable job.



Co-operation with employers plays a central role in finding a job for a student. The student's team try to find potential employers in the region where the student lives. The aim is to find a base for work practice, but also for later employment for the student. After receiving initial consent from the employer, the employment specialist and vocational teacher visit the company. If necessary, rehabilitation specialists are also included. When visiting the company, the work place is assessed, the employer is given initial informa-

tion about the student's skills, together with the employer the suitable work tasks are discussed, and all questions that may arise are answered as well as possible. If necessary, the rehabilitation specialists help to assess the physical environment at the work place, the need for its adjustment and the suitability of the work tasks for the student. Should the student start work practice, the employer will be supported and counselled, and help is offered to solve any problems that emerge.

The last stage of the programme is helping the student at work. If the student so requests, he or she may be supported during the first days at work and also later, according to the need. The student has the chance to turn to the employment specialist to receive additional information and to ask for help in solving problems.

A student that has not been employed by the end of the programme will be offered the chance to co-operate with other specialists and, according to the possibilities available in the student's home town, other alternatives for keeping active (continuing education, participating in the activities of a day centre, volunteer work, etc.).

■ ■ ■ **Elmar's story**

Elmar (name changed) studied woodwork in a prevocational course at the Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre, where he acquired the main skills necessary for woodworking. Elmar is dutiful, sociable, benevolent and always helpful. He is also very modest. He has a speech impediment; he talks little, and mostly answers questions with "yes" or "no". In a familiar environment where he feels safe, he uses single words or short sentences. Reading is also very difficult for Elmar.

At the end of the course, Elmar's vocational skills were so good that the specialists judged that he did not need further education at the Astangu Centre and was ready to step out. The vocational teacher also concluded that Elmar was ready to start working. The teacher stated that, although Elmar's work tempo was slow, his work quality was high. He was able to carry out routine tasks during a longer period. He understood simple oral guidance well. Elmar also had a very good memory. At work he required regular breaks.

In February, Elmar joined the programme *To Work with Support*. The aim was to find a suitable job for Elmar after he graduated from the Astangu Centre. Elmar's support team consisted of an employment specialist, vocational teacher, speech therapist, activity therapist and social worker. An activity plan was drawn up for Elmar. In order to find a suitable job for him, the following activities were carried out:

The speech therapist and employment specialist did their utmost to determine which jobs Elmar would prefer, using the Jobpics methodology (picture cards displaying various job positions). Using the Hamet¹ assessment methodology, Elmar's professional suitability, work ability and work behaviour were assessed.

To judge the suitability of manual labour, a work test was carried out in a protected work room where Elmar was able to test various types of manual work (packing, folding, gluing, etc.). A portfolio was compiled for Elmar. It included photos of work he had performed and a brief description of him.

The social worker carried out various activities (money planning, shopping, preparing food, etc.) to raise Elmar's level of independence and his ability to manage his life. Music therapy and speech rehabilitation that took place during the studies were continued in order to increase the client's ability for self-expression.

The Employment Union specialist looked for an appropriate place for work practice, where Elmar could gain practical work experience and, if the company was a good match, start working later. The employment specialist found a suitable company, in co-operation with the vocational teacher, in Elmar's home town. The company produces doors, windows and stairs. In order to make sure that the company was acceptable, the vocational teacher, speech therapist and employment specialist visited the employer. He was given an overview of Elmar's skills and guidelines on how to communicate with El-

¹ The Hamet testing method was developed in Germany by BBW Waiblingen. Hamet is a standardised test during which it is possible to assess how a person with special needs carries out different tasks and how they conduct themselves during these activities. As a result of this testing, it is possible to give an assessment about what kind of tasks this person can carry out, what type of work might be suitable for them (full-time, part-time, sheltered work) and what support they might need to further develop their work capability.

mar. Information was also shared on which work tasks could be suitable for him. The employer was willing to offer Elmar a work experience placement in order to ascertain whether he would be able to cope in a job on the open labour market. The work experience placement was discussed with Elmar, his mother and specialists who felt that it was a good opportunity for Elmar.

Elmar's work experience placement lasted for one month. During the work practice, Elmar tried various auxiliary work tasks. The employment specialist was in close communication with the company and the student's mother, and received positive feedback from both. Since Elmar was successful in the tasks assigned to him, the employment specialist continued negotiations with the employer in order to find a possibility for Elmar to start work at the company. The final decision was made at a meeting between the employer, Elmar, Elmar's mother, the employment specialist and the vocational teacher. The result of the meeting was that Elmar and the company entered into a one-year employment contract. After the end of the fixed-term contract, Elmar and the employer entered into a new employment contract, this time open-ended. Today the employer is still very pleased with Elmar. Elmar is also very pleased with his job and has adapted well to his new environment.

■ ■ ■ Conclusion

The method of the Astangu Vocational Rehabilitation Centre is *multifaceted support through the joint effort of a team of professionals*. Furthermore, the scope of attention is extended to the official institutions in the client's home town, his/her family and friends – in other words, everybody who belongs to the social life of the supported person. This system is based on the clear insight that a disability affects a person's whole life – just as a vocation does. As Friedrich Nietzsche said, "a vocation is the backbone of life". To make sure that a disabled person succeeds in his/her career whatever it may be, everybody involved must stand by his/her side.

FINLAND

Employer Counseling – A New Way to Improve the Employment of Rehabilitees

Kaarina Latostenmaa and Nina Aarola

How Can a Well-Designed Course Help a Mental Health Rehabilitee to Get a Job?

Kirsi Koskimäki

The ASPA Model of Supported Employment

Sirpa Paukkeri-Reyes

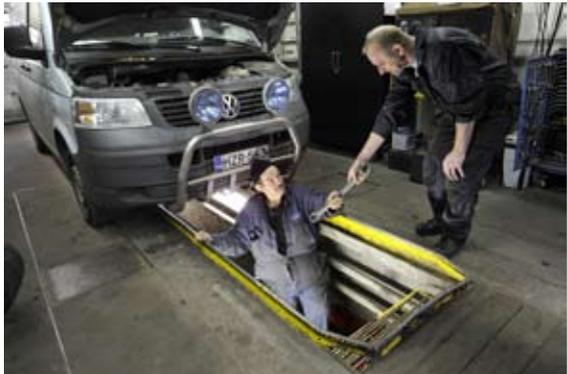
Socially Responsible Businesses Recruiting Professionals with Disabilities in the Project *Leap to Labour!*

Liisa-Maija Verainen

Employer Counselling – a New Way to Improve the Employment of Rehabilitees

Kaarina Latostenmaa and Nina Aarola

The Employer Counselling model was initially developed within the *Mood For Work* project at Satakunta University of Applied Sciences (SAMK). This piloting took place in 2011. The results were encouraging, and some parts of the model are already in use in partner organisations. Since 2012, the international ESF-funded follow-up project has continued the work and started to spread the results within Europe.



Mika Vuorio/SK

The idea is to make the recruitment from special groups easy for employers. The entrepreneurs are given information about the rehabilitees as potential labour and practical, company-specific services for the recruitment process on a turnkey basis. This has led to the creation of the Employer Counselling model.

A fresh positive way to approach the issue and success stories told in media are part of the model and encourage companies for new thinking about recruitment and raise the profile of rehabilitees as workers in spite of their rehabilitee status. The ultimate goal is to decrease social exclusion and its various effects as well as to prepare for the shrinkage of working-age population.

■ ■ ■ **Surveying employers' attitudes**

In the beginning, it was necessary to chart employers' prevailing attitudes towards the idea of employing mental health rehabilitees to get a picture of the field of work. A survey of 120 employers was therefore carried out in the Satakunta region of Finland. The survey also explored the employers' need for information and support related to the employment process. According to the study, over half the employers have, in principle, a positive attitude towards the idea of employing a mental health rehabilitee, but they simply need more information to make such a decision and support for the actual recruitment process. The study revealed that information on the following topics is crucial for employers in general:

- rehabilitees as workers
- support for salary costs
- job coaching services
- agencies helping with recruitment

Furthermore, the employers want to have company-specific help in the employment of a rehabilitee, and, due to the lack of time, they expect that service to focus on the company premises.

■ ■ ■ **What is Employer Counselling?**

These results led to the development of the Employer Counselling model within the *Mood For Work* project. The Employer Counselling model consists of two parts:

1. Individual counselling of entrepreneurs, employers and recruiters ("Case management").
2. Cross-sectoral cooperation making the recruitment processes flexible both for employers and rehabilitees ("Service coordination").

The individual counselling consists of guiding and supporting the employers right from the beginning of the recruiting process, and even before. The aim of employer counselling is to provide a proactive service.



“The main innovative idea in the employer counselling model is the fresh employer-oriented perspective: the focus is on the employer as it has traditionally been strongly on the strengthening of rehabilitee’s competences.”

The entrepreneurs and employers will receive an “Employers’ information package”, prepared by the *Mood For Work* project. Additionally, a specific counsellor will coordinate the interaction between the employer, the employee, the employment and economic development office, the social security institution *Kela*, and other institutions for the whole duration of the recruiting process.

The model was piloted in Satakunta and the results of the evaluation were excellent. The entrepreneurs most appreciated the company-specific tailoring of information and services and the fresh way to approach them

The commitment of the local key operators to cross-sectoral development work is a basic requirement for success. In Satakunta, decision-makers and experts by experience together with managers and specialists of organisations have fortunately been active and involved, which in turn has led to good results. One example of those good results is that the employment authorities in Satakunta have started to apply the Employer Counselling model in their customer practices, especially in the employer services. The long-term aim is to have one contact person coordinating all cross-sectoral services when recruiting a rehabilitee.

The main innovative idea in the employer counselling model is the fresh employer-oriented perspective: the focus is on the employer as it has traditionally been strongly on the strengthening of rehabilitee’s competences. The spreading of our model for employers has been successful because of this positive perspective on this difficult issue, for example, through the success stories told by the entrepreneurs who have succeeded in their employment processes with rehabilitees.

■ ■ ■ **Employer Counselling goes international**

The Employer Counselling model was introduced for the first time to an international audience in Employment Week 2010 in Brussels. The model aroused interest among the Employment Forum participants.

The next international venue was the 2nd Transnational Partner Search Forum in Warsaw in March 2011, co-financed by the European Social Fund with the Human Capital Operational Programme. The Employer Counselling model was considered new and innovative, because it approaches the question of the employment of the disabled from a fresh, employer-oriented perspective. The Warsaw Conference led to international cooperation with Swedish and German partners.

Since June 2012, the focus has been on international activities. The main interest is to disseminate and further develop the model in a European context, and to discover new good practices with international partners. We work on comparing the ideas and experiences found at local, regional and national level, discussing and evaluating them at an international level, and then again reflecting the best results back to the local level.

■ ■ ■ **International partners of *Mood For Work***

The societal background for the *Mood For Work* project and its partners is the current problematic situation that, on one hand, we have a labour shortage in certain fields of work and, on the other hand, we have unemployed rehabilitees who may emerge as potential manpower. This non-matching problem can be solved by the development of employment processes and by taking into account also the recruitment needs of small enterprises.

The Swedish *Klara Livet* project administered by the Council of Blekinge helps persons who have been absent from working life for a long time. The project has developed methods of peer learning and mindfulness to enhance empowerment. The methods have been tested during several courses and training periods of 22 weeks each. The results are good. These methods strengthen the participants' likelihood of ending up in a decent job.



The *Boomerang* project from Halmstad, Sweden, aims to help the long-term unemployed and people with disabilities back into the open labour market through work in social companies. There a similar project plans for the integration and inclusion of rehabilitees to small businesses also in Thurengia, Germany.

Furthermore, the Coronel Institute for Occupational And Environmental Health, an academic medical centre of the University of Amsterdam, is one of the active international partner organisations of *Mood For Work*. They have presented interesting research results related to the return-to-work of mental health rehabilitees from a multi-stakeholder perspective.

■ ■ ■ “The Big Picture”

From now on, *Mood For Work* will work with partners we can portray the “Big Picture” of the employment of special groups from different perspectives. Reflection groups on a national level have meetings in order to disseminate and discuss other countries’ results and to put forward practices that could be applicable to their own partner organisations. This is how to make the Employer Counselling model more refined through the contribution of partners committed to its development.

The first meeting of the international part of the project was held in Brussels (the symposium on Mental Health at the Workplace) on 30th October 2012. At the 11th World Congress of Psychosocial Rehabilitation (WAPR2012) in Milan in November 2012 *Mood For Work* gave two presentations there, and also participated with a poster. In May 2013 the project visited Mâcon, France, together with the Swedish partners who had visited Finland in November 2012. We learned about local practices on supporting employment of special groups. There was also a meeting in Paris with the Dutch partner during this voyage. The Employer Counselling model aroused great interest among the audience. *Mood For Work* will next participate together with the *Klara Livet* project at the 11th EUSE Conference in Dublin in June 2013 focusing on the theme “Building an Inclusive Europe through Supported Employment”. In November 2013, *Mood For Work* will attend The Employment Forum in Brussels and arrange a partner meeting there.

■ ■ ■ **Employer Counselling fits many situations**

In the beginning, the *Mood For Work* project focused mainly on the employment issues of mental health rehabilitees. However, after successful piloting of the Employer Counselling model, it became obvious that this model could also be applicable to other people with limited ability to work. The extension of the target group to all kinds of people with different disabilities has increased our possibilities to influence the service system. The Employer Counselling model has recently been a topic of active international discussion. Thus it seems that this model has all the prerequisites for being one of the best practices in a European context.

■ ■ ■ **“I managed to get a motivated worker with the support of Employer Counselling”**

(Jarmo Metsämäki, Entrepreneur, *Autohuolto Veljet Metsämäki Ky*)

Based on an interview with Jarmo Metsämäki

Jarmo Metsämäki, the owner of a car repair shop in Kiukainen, is a socially-conscious employer. He took his chance to employ a mental health rehabilitee with the support of Employer Counselling provided by the *Mood For Work* project. He thinks that it was a WIN-WIN-situation for all: an employer in need of manpower got a motivated worker, and a rehabilitee got an opportunity to find a tailored way back to working life.

With Employer Counselling, the right forms of support were easy to find. Jarmo Metsämäki says that Employer Counselling plays a crucial role in a process where an employer ends up recruiting a rehabilitee. “The employer counselling service makes things easier. Without it the employment can be left unfinished despite all good intentions. It is also important that you don’t have to knock on too many doors without answers. You can get frustrated with this kind of “runaround”. But after a good start, an entrepreneur knows how to go on.”

Jarmo Metsämäki emphasises the meaning of work for rehabilitees. “When an employer embarks on hiring a rehabilitee, he gives an opportunity to that rehabilitee. Of course recruiting a rehabilitee requires a certain positive at-



titude from the employer. It is important that s/he is willing to invest and engage in the worker in the long term.” The encouragement of employers to recruit rehabilitees is very significant for all of us and for society as a whole. Jarmo Metsämäki hopes that employing different rehabilitees will be discussed more actively, for instance at entrepreneurial events.

Jarmo Metsämäki characterises Employer Counselling as very concrete and diverse. “As an entrepreneur, I appreciate that the first move to initiate the process of employing a rehabilitee is made by the Employer Counsellor. Often those employers who do not actively take contact by themselves are still interested if the service is offered to them. That’s how things start to roll!”

“It saves a lot of precious time if someone takes care of the whole process in a holistic way,” Metsämäki says. In Metsämäki’s case, the help was indispensable, for instance in the contacts with the insurance company (the work trial) and the employment and economic development office (the support for salary costs).

From the rehabilitee’s point of view, it is also important that there is someone outside the company who supervises the worker’s activities at the beginning of work. This means that there is someone to contact if any problems arise, and if the rehabilitee doesn’t dare to discuss the problem immediately in the new workplace. The employer also feels more relaxed knowing that the contact person is available when needed.”

According to Jarmo Metsämäki, a good Employer Counsellor keeps in touch at suitable intervals and anticipates the future. “The Employer Counsellor should also advise in matters that the employer does not even know that s/he should ask. Most importantly, the Employer Counsellor is a specialist with a kind heart and right attitude.

Jarmo Metsämäki hopes that tailored Employer Counselling will be established as a permanent service. “It’s reasonable and certainly enhances the employment of rehabilitees. We need Employer Counselling services to make things work.” The entrepreneur summarises his satisfaction: “It has been wonderful to see a new worker feeling fine and enjoying work. And the work will get done!”

Mood For Work -project in breaf

Administrator: Satakunta University of Applied Sciences (SAMK)

Financiers: SAMK, Centre for Economic Development, Transport and Environment, European Social Fund

The objective is to inform and courage entrepreneurs to employ rehabilitees by offering company-specific Employer Counselling. People with limited ability to work should be seen as potential labour for enterprises. The goal is to decrease social exclusion and labour shortage.

How Can a Well-Designed Course Help a Mental Health Rehabilitee to Get a Job?

Kirsi Koskimäki

■ ■ ■ Finnish Central Association for Mental Health

The Finnish Central Association for Mental Health, an association for people suffering and recovering from psychiatric problems, was founded in 1971. The Association is mainly funded by the Slot Machine Association of Finland¹. The Finnish Central Association for Mental Health consists of approximately 190 mental health associations from all over the country, which in turn have a total of about 22,000 members.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Support Centre, called *Amos*, was established in 2005 as part of the Association. About 200 persons with mental health problems participate in Amos courses or have individual counselling yearly. The aim is to help the clients with their plans on pursuing studies and gaining employment. The focus is on finding and building up each person's resources, goals and dreams, and creating a new attitude towards themselves and their possibilities in life. A solution-centred approach and peer support are key elements in the courses, which usually have meetings once a week. This action enhances the rehabilitation process as a whole, as progress happens between the sessions.

Many of the course participants have been out of work for many years. Return to working life usually happens gradually. For some, participating in an Amos course is the first step towards a more active life. Others are ready to look for a job soon after the course, or even during it. A person recovering from mental problems may face prejudices when seeking a job. This bias raises the threshold for getting a job, since the mere effort of looking for a job is a big step and a big challenge for many. Most of the participants would prefer a part-time job, which is often a better alternative than a full-time job,

¹ RAY, i. e. *Raha-automaattiyhdistys* ('Slot Machine Association'), is the main financier for a myriad of projects relating to health and social issues in Finland, together with ESF (European Social Fund).

because of the applicant's limited resources. Few get a full-time job soon after the course; it is more common to get a part-time one. Some start to study, especially if they want to change vocation.

In the rest of this article, we shall illuminate the effect of these courses through two case studies. Depression is a major mental health problem in Finland, so both cases are picked from this field of life.

■ ■ ■ **Antti's case**

Antti is a 47-year-old man with an education in the field of technology. He had worked for many years in a small engineering company. He did a lot of overtime work and was often on sick leave due to depression. Finally, together with his supervisor, he came to the conclusion that he could not continue at work anymore. Antti became unemployed.

Once when he was visiting his nurse, he was given a brochure about a *Make Your Wishes a Reality* course. He applied for the course and was accepted. The course was held once a week, six hours at a time, for two and half months. The total number of group meetings was thus about ten.

“One of the aims of the course was to help students to create a new attitude towards themselves and their possibilities in life.”

Antti did not expect to get ready-made solutions from the course. Instead, he was hoping to gain some tools to cope with depression and to return to work. Initially he had mixed feelings: on one hand he was hopeful and confident of getting benefit from the course; on the other hand he found it difficult to get interested in anything. He was reserved in the group at first, but at the same time he was in principle open-minded. Therefore he became more relaxed little-by-little, when he got to know the other participants. Most importantly, Antti set his goals with a positive-realistic attitude. He was eager to return to working life.

One of the aims of the course was to help students to create a new attitude towards themselves and their possibilities in life. Antti found it empowering to identify his strengths. The professionals of the association emphasised



that rehabilitation was a process, not all the plans and ideas had to come true immediately, and that things might take time. It was important to take small steps in the right direction.

Support and help from the job coaches on a more concrete level were equally important. They provided information and hints about different possibilities of returning to working life and, for example, what to tell and what not to when you apply for a job. The course included practice in making good job applications and CVs. Simulated job interviews were also arranged to rehearse those situations.

The atmosphere on the course was good. Antti felt accepted as he was and nobody put any pressure on him. The participants shared experiences and ideas and got support from each other. Everybody had gone through difficult times, but had been able to surmount them. Antti's spirits rose when he realised that he was not the only one with problems.

The course was so efficient that Antti sent his first job application before the course had ended, and it was easy for him to go to the interview due to the training on the course. He got his current job soon after. He now works in the same field as before, but in a bigger company where he has an opportunity to negotiate for more flexible working hours.

■ ■ ■ **Hanna's case**

Hanna is a 26-year-old woman. She finished basic school, but dropped out of high school. She has no professional education. Nevertheless, Hanna worked for several years in a shop, but the work alternated with occasional periods of unemployment. At the age of 20, she was diagnosed as depressed. For the last two years, she has been receiving Rehabilitation Allowance.

Hanna's life went downhill until she ended up in hospital, because coping with everyday life was too hard for her. She would sleep until noon and stay awake until the small hours. In the hospital, Hanna participated in a course arranged by the Finnish Central Association for Mental Health, a short "*Dream Oasis*" course. This was a turning point in her rehabilitation. She had lost her courage to dream and to believe

that she could still achieve something. She was naturally not satisfied with her situation, but was too weak to try to make a change in her life.

The central theme at the *Dream Oasis* course was the meaning of dreams: dreams tell something important about you and what you want in your life. During the course Hanna made a mind map in order to get in touch with her own dreams. One of Hanna's dreams was to return to working life. Another topic of the course was how to identify strengths and resources, which are needed in making dreams come true. Exercises in the *Dream Oasis* course led Hanna to think, cautiously at first, that maybe she after all did have the potential to do something meaningful, and maybe she had more resources and strengths than she knew of.

Next Hanna applied for a *Go for a Job!* course organised by the Vocational Rehabilitation Support Centre of the Finnish Central Association for Mental Health. The purpose of this course was to coach the participants to return to working life. The group had meetings once a week. In the beginning, everybody set their personal goals. They did exercises that helped them identify their strengths, skills and resources. The course provided plenty of information and discussion on how to apply for a job after having had mental health problems. All the participants had been out of working life for years. They shared a common concern about the gaps in their work histories. Discussion in the peer group encouraged Hanna. It is empowering to realise that there are others in the same boat, and that these people are going to survive.

The course was especially designed to help the participants to find a job, so Hanna got plenty of information about different possibilities to work and study. The participants also practised making job applications and CVs, and rehearsed for job interviews in simulated settings, as in Antti's case described above. Even the idea of looking for a job made Hanna distressed, because she did not know how to tell an employer that she had been out of labour market for the past two years due to mental health problems.

Fortunately, the course included two weeks of work experience. Hanna was worried about getting a work experience placement and did not dare to contact the human resources manager of an interesting job. She was so worried that, despite going to the door of the enterprise, she turned back because she did not dare to enter. Other participants in the course supported and en-



couraged Hanna until she finally applied for a work experience placement. Hanna went to an enterprise whose owner had experience of mental health problems. However, Hanna did not know about this in advance.

Hanna never came back to the course after the work experience. She remained at the enterprise and started an apprenticeship in Further Qualification in Sales. Afterwards Hanna said that it was a huge challenge to take care of her own rehabilitation process, to study and work at the same time. However, she was able to do it, and so she did it.

Sometimes changes happen very quickly: within six months Hanna moved from hospital to working life.

■ ■ ■ **Short courses for mental health rehabilitees – what makes this a good practice?**

In Antti's case, encouragement and help from job coaches were substantial in his vocational rehabilitation. Exercises on self-acceptance and in-depth discussion about changing attitudes towards yourself also increased his self-confidence. Antti's case exemplifies a very common feature in any rehabilitation or even in life in general: it is important to start changing one's life by taking small steps. Progressing in baby steps is the best way to get positive experiences and success. On a more practical level, making applications to the course helped Antti to apply for jobs later, and similarly the interview training gave him confidence in real job interviews. Peer support was of great significance throughout the whole process.

In Hanna's case, it was essential that the short *Dream Oasis* course was held at the hospital. That's where the threshold to participate was low. Easy availability of services is crucial in many cases. Another notable factor is that it was Hanna's own decision to participate in the course. She was not sent by anyone. That is why Hanna was motivated to take the course seriously. Information about different possibilities to work and study helped Hanna to realise that there are many different paths to get back to working life and to get a vocation. Hospitalisation is not a dead end. This larger perspective on life gave her hope.

Hanna's return to working life began with her setting her own goals. The courses are designed on the basis that everyone is the best expert of their own life. For Hanna, it was challenging to set goals and to take more responsibility for her own life. This weakness stems from the fact that she had for a long time been just an object of various actions. Others had defined her identity and her ability to work. During the course, Hanna began little-by-little to get back her subjectivity and her own will. The course focused on identifying people's resources and skills and, in Hanna's case, this framework served to strengthen her self-confidence. In addition, the opportunity to share experiences with peers was an empowering experience. The next step was the work experience period, which in turn was a concrete step towards employment. In Hanna's case, an open-minded employer with a positive attitude towards a mental health rehabilitee played a crucial role.

Courses for job-seekers with mental health problems increase their likelihood of getting a decent job. A course designed for this purpose should include work experience placement and peer support. The result is better self-confidence and self-acceptance, which in turn lay a solid foundation for practically any endeavour in life. These personal qualities gain strength from encouragement, practical exercises and peer support. It is our hope that as many mental health rehabilitees as possible will follow the steps of Antti and Hanna – small steps towards a better life.

The ASPA Model of Supported Employment

Sirpa Paukkeri-Reyes

■ ■ ■ What is the ASPA model of supported employment?

The Housing Services Foundation ASPA developed its own model of supported employment in the years 2008–2011. The model has been utilized and developed further in two employment projects run by ASPA: the *Bridge to Work* and the *Work – Path to Participation*. In addition, the model has been tested in the capital region and in a small town in the northern part of the West Coast of Finland. This has provided information about the model's functioning in a variety of environments.

In the ASPA model of supported employment, the job seeker who needs assistance to find employment receives support before entering the job or work trial as well as on the job. The target group includes disabled people, people with reduced ability to work and people recovering from mental health problems. Groups such as the long-term-unemployed are also included – generally speaking, all who have not managed to achieve employment independently or with the help of the employment office. In the employment process, we utilize several different methods. These include job coaching, supported work trial and trained mentors who provide support for the new employee in the workplace. Successful employment can also be facilitated by job tailoring. Task content, working hours and job description are adjusted to create a package that suits both employer and employee.

To start with, the job seeker is offered individual and group based job coaching. The job seeker's strengths and successes are stressed as being essential pillars which support her/his ability to cope in the workplace. It must be noted that the party that is willing to offer the job seeker a work trial placement, and potentially a job, usually needs support in receiving the new employee. A member of the staff at the workplace in question is trained to become a workplace mentor with the task of guiding the job seeker who needs help and familiarizing him or her with the tasks to be performed.

Workplace mentoring of this type has been piloted in Finland in several different types of workplaces. Organizations that provide catering, office work, social and health care services and building management have been involved, among others. At the time of writing this article, there are just under 40 workplace mentors, working in a number of different organizations.

Employment leads to increased inclusion in society. A basic premise of the ASPA model of supported employment is the idea that we all have a right to economic and social well-being – something that employment, hopefully, will bring. Finding and sustaining employment requires investment from a number of different parties, and the model challenges all such parties to contribute to the joint effort: job seekers, employers, Employment and Economic Development (or EED) Offices, Workforce Service Centers, social service officials and municipal authorities

■ ■ ■ **The Structure of the ASPA model of supported employment**

The ASPA model of supported employment consists of three crucial parts. These are job coaching, supported work trial and support in the workplace.

1. Job coaching: The job seeker is offered individual and group based coaching to support finding employment or returning to work. In group based job coaching job seekers aspiring to different fields receive peer support from each other and an instructor offers them guidance, targeting challenges common to all participants. The goal is to strengthen the motivation and abilities that will help the job seekers in finding employment or returning to work. Over three training days, the participants utilize active learning methods to process topics such as time management during transition to employment, and they list factors that motivate them to find employment. The groups discuss the benefits that employment could offer. Further, they analyze the job description at the potential workplace, the employer's demands and expectations, but also the job seeker's own expectations and opportunities to promote coping, both for themselves and for the workplace community. Other topics



that are covered include showing one's strengths at work and observing workplace practices. A supervised group meeting arranged at a later date provides the job seekers support during their work trials. In this meeting, the participants discuss questions and feelings that have surfaced in the course of the work trial.

2. Supported work trial: The job seeker is offered a work trial placement with a trained workplace mentor to provide him or her support.

3. Support in the workplace: An employee of the organization that offers the work trial placement is trained to work as a workplace mentor. Entire workplace communities are offered diversity training, covering three topics: diversity, well-being at work, and mentoring.

Workplace mentor training takes place in groups consisting of personnel from different workplaces and different fields. The main themes of the three training days are:

- a. Diversity in the workplace community, aiming to break stereotypes, to welcome the new colleague and to prepare for the task of offering orientation support.
- b. Well-being and coping at the workplace, aiming to involve the entire workplace community in the new person's employment process, to analyze tasks and to promote well-being in the workplace.
- c. Solution-centered approach and mentoring, with an emphasis on acquiring concrete tools to be used in mentoring, preparing to have the new colleague at the workplace, and discussing one's own roles to gain insight into them.

These topics are processed through lectures and active learning methods, working singly, in pairs and in groups. A supervised group meeting that is arranged at a later date supports the workplace mentors in their task of instructing the job seekers during the work trials. In this group meeting, the participants

discuss questions and feelings that have surfaced in the course of the work trial.

The ASPA model of supported employment is meant for...

- ... those who feel they need support to find employment.
- ... those who are unemployed and motivated to commit themselves to job coaching.
- ... employers who are prepared to try new approaches to recruitment.
- ... employers who feel that diversity in the workplace community is a positive resource.

I. Support for the job seeker

Individual support and guidance by a job coach



- One-on-one meeting
- Visit to the EED office
- Interview and getting to know the workplace

Job coaching in groups

- Training days in a peer support group
- Showing personal strengths!

Work trial

- Finding the kind of work trial place the client wishes to have
- Visits by job coach to the workplace
- An instructional meeting with the peer group during the work trial

Support by workplace mentor at the workplace

- A trained workplace mentor instructs the jobseeker in his or her tasks at the workplace

2. Support for the employer organization

Support is also offered to employers who wish to employ a person with reduced ability to work.

Support and training at the workplace:

- A member of the staff at the workplace is trained to become a workplace mentor whose task is to support the jobseeker.
- The workplace mentor is offered training days and a supervised meeting with a peer group to support efforts in orientating the jobseeker.
- Workplace communities are offered diversity training.
- The employer has an extra worker for the duration of the work trial, and after the trial there is an opportunity to employ the jobseeker who has already been orientated.



Information and support for the employer:

- Possible wage subsidy and financial support for adjusting working conditions
- Apprenticeship training for the job seeker
- Support with the work trial

Benefits for the job seeker

Improved chances of finding employment with job coaching

- Peer support in job coaching groups
- Individual support, emphasizing strengths

Work trial as a tool to support employment

- Offers the jobseekers a chance to "prove themselves"
- Workplace mentor provides support and orientation to tasks and workplace community
- Workplace mentor remains the workplace after the trial
- The entire workplace community supports the new worker

Employment!

- As the new employee receives good orientation and instruction at the workplace, there is a better chance of moving towards successful employment
- Support provided by the workplace mentor and the workplace community will continue if necessary

Benefits for the employer

Employer

- Adds new knowhow into the workplace community
- Workplace mentor training for the organization's own staff
- The workplace mentor has competence to observe issues affecting coping at work and workplace culture
- The company or organization is acting in a socially responsible way

Workplace community develops

- Training
- Increased well-being
- Increased diversity and greater acceptance of workers with differences in the workplace community
- The entire workplace community supports the new worker

New employee how knows the job!

- As the new employee receives thorough orientation and instruction in the workplace, chances of successful employment are greatly improved
- Support provided by the workplace mentor and the workplace community continues if necessary
- Later, the workplace mentor can for example instruct a student or support a worker who returns to work after a long break

■ ■ ■ Tiina's story

Being excluded from working life for several years affects the course of a person's life significantly. Tiina, one of the many unemployed people in Finland, had been outside the job market for two years after suffering from major depressive disorder. As the depression subsided, returning to the kind of work that she was qualified for started to feel like a realistic future scenario, but illness does not come alone: Tiina was not at all sure about her own ability to cope.



■ ■ ■ The project *Bridge to Work* offered a new chance

Luckily, at the EED office Tiina happened to encounter an official who was up to the task, and introduced Tiina to the *Bridge to Work* project. This project had been designed to offer support to people who wished to return to working life after a long absence due to health issues. Tiina contacted the project workers, who felt that they could offer Tiina both individual guidance and job coaching in a peer group. Further, the project workers took it upon themselves to find a suitable work trial place for Tiina, one that would make the return to working life as easy as possible.

■ ■ ■ Preparation in the early stages created the basis for success

The execution of the plan started with one-on-one meetings between Tiina and a worker from the *Bridge to Work* project. In these meetings, Tiina's areas of expertise were mapped, and the conclusion was that the best place for a work trial would be a day care center. Before the work trial was actually started, Tiina and the



project worker visited the EED office to make sure that Tiina would receive the EED office' support for her return to work through the work trial. The EED office granted Tiina the right to a six-month period of working life training and a wage subsidy if the employer were to offer her a job after the training period.

Before the actual work trial Tiina participated in a three-day, group-based job coaching period. The participants in the groups were people returning to working life, with different backgrounds, people who, like Tiina, wanted to give some serious thought to their strengths, motivation, time management skills, ability to cope at work, ways to develop professionally, and the possible content of their future work. The most important things Tiina received from the group sessions were a boost to her self-confidence and a broadening of her employment prospects.

■ ■ ■ The work trial – beginning of a new career



Soon the project worker informed Tiina that a suitable work trial place had been found a nearby day care center. The worker accompanied Tiina to a meeting where they discussed ordinary matters that have to do with starting at a new job: the employer told about how the day care center functioned, Tiina presented her educational and work history, and the worker from the *Bridge to Work* project offered advice in practical matters related to the work trial period. A training period of two months seemed like a sensible solution, to give Tiina time to try out the job without haste and think whether this was the kind of job she would like to commit to for a longer period. A

written contract of the work trial was drawn, specifying the involved parties to be the worker, the employer and the EED office.

■ ■ ■ Support measures at the workplace

The support provided by the Bridge to Work project did not end here. At the workplace, Tiina was met by a workplace mentor – a member of the workplace community who was interested in offering instruction and orientation to the new employee, and had been trained by the project to carry out this task. In addition, the project worker came to meet Tiina at the workplace after one week. At this point, they discussed Tiina's first impressions of how comfortable she was at the new workplace, and how she was managing the work itself. Tiina also participated in a peer group meeting that was held at the project premises, as part of the work trial. The other participants were the same people that Tiina had met before her work trial, during the job coaching days. At the peer group Tiina found out that everyone had very similar experiences when it came to issues like fatigue – others too had a hard time getting up early in the morning to go to work, and finding the right kind of daily rhythm took time. On the other hand, in the course of the work trial Tiina found that she enjoyed working with children immensely. As the trial period was nearing its end, the feeling of fatigue had eased and she felt she could think clearly, because the work had given life new meaning. Tiina's sense of being able to cope with the job grew stronger, and she received encouraging feedback from her workplace community for the calm manner in which she approached her work. Interacting with children came naturally to Tiina, as she had assumed from the beginning – working with children actually gave her energy.



■ ■ ■ Success

At the end of the trial period, a concluding discussion was arranged, with Tiina, the workplace mentor, the project worker and the director of the day care center present. All were satisfied with the outcome of the work trial period. It was jointly concluded that Tiina's work trial period would be continued for another four months so that she could gain some more confidence in her job before taking on the kind of responsibility that the regular employ-

ees had. The bridge to employment is long, but crossing it pays off. After going through the whole process, Tiina had built enough confidence as a worker and a sense of her own ability to cope, and she was able to accept regular paid employment. In the end, Tiina continued as a worker at the same day care center where she did the work trial, and she entered into employment with the employer receiving a wage subsidy. In addition to raising her social standing, the job improved Tiina's financial situation and her life management generally, so the result was a *win-win* situation at its best.



■ ■ ■ Opportunities offered by the ASPA model of supported employment

With the help of the ASPA model of supported employment, a person who is motivated to work receives a chance to build a path to working life, supporting his or her personal strengths. The employer will recruit a motivated employee. In the actual tasks at the workplace, the new colleague is guided, orientated and supported by a workplace mentor who has been selected from among the regular workers. The model supports people towards equality and inclusion in society through employment. The ASPA model of supported employment offers opportunities to promote diversity in workplace communities and acceptance of difference in working life.

Employment Cooperation Between the Networks of Socially Responsible Businesses and Disability Organizations in the Project *Leap to Labour!*

Liisa-Maija Verainen

■ ■ ■ Introduction

The Finnish Neuromuscular Disorders Association is a national organization for people with neuromuscular disabilities as well as their relatives. The purpose of the Association is to promote the members' right to rich and equal life, and to support their civil rights. The progressive nature of neuromuscular illnesses, their rarity and severity increase the need for special support for those who live with them, and the need for information about such diseases for those who work with the employment issues of the disabled. People with neuromuscular disabilities are often highly educated, but unfortunately it is their illness, with the need of a wheelchair or an assistant, that determine their possibilities of getting a job rather than their expertise.

“The disabled are not a homogenous group of people – on the contrary everybody is an individual with special skills and special needs.”

Leap to labour! was a project conducted by the Neuromuscular Disorders Association in 2006–2008. The goal of the project was to create a model to enhance the employment of people with disabilities through co-operation with companies and different disability organizations. The project paired up disabled job seekers from the organizations with companies in need of manpower. At the same time, the project aimed to stimulate public discussion about the social responsibility of companies. Contacts to the business sector were established through a network of sustainable responsible businesses, Finnish Business & Society¹ (*FIBS*). The project *Leap to labour!* could reach those job seekers who

¹ *FIBS* is a network of companies committed to corporate social responsibility. It offers a forum for meeting others interested in social responsibility at different gatherings. For the

needed extra encouragement. Some of those job seekers were actually on a disability pension.

The disability organizations know their own members. Thus the staff at the organizations was aware of the educated, professional people among their members. Sadly, often those educated people stay at home from day to day instead of actively searching for a job. An important prerequisite for success was the involvement of eleven organizations² and all the knowledge they had. Organizations related to physical and sensory disabilities took part, as well as one organization representing people with mental health problems. By compounding the expertise of all these organizations, a comprehensive view was gained of the question of disabled people in working life. The disabled are not a homogenous group of people – on the contrary everybody is an individual with special skills and special needs. The organizations could provide plenty of information concerning those special needs, and this information turned out to be very useful in the project.

■ ■ ■ **How the project *Leap to Labour!* functioned**

The project manager acted like a “barker” – she matched a suitably skilled disabled person with a suitable job. A *face-to-face meeting* with the employer and providing her/him with *correct information* turned out to be very important factors in the cases that ended successfully, in an employment contract. The project manager also had a disease that reduced her work capacity, so she herself could offer a positive example by being an academic person and thus challenging the prejudices against people with disabilities and suspicion concerning their skills and work capacity. 76 job seekers found a job during the project. This relatively high number stems from personal meetings with the employers, but also from local and regional meeting forums. Such forums were organized in Jyväskylä, Oulu, Turku, Seinäjoki and Kuopio. Job seekers, representatives of enterprises and employment officials were invited to the meetings, to receive information about support methods facilitating the employment of the disabled. The au-

organizations involved, it offers tools for developing, measuring and reporting their level of social responsibility. www.fibsry.fi

2 See www.sisaanheitto.fi for further details.



dience was also reminded of the social responsibility of companies. This social responsibility³ is connected with promoting diversity in the workplace, i.e. diversity of age, ethnicity, gender, disability, etc. among the staff. In the broadest sense, *social responsibility* embodies all kinds of diversity among customers, human resources and interest groups that the enterprise has to deal with. Enhancing variation among the individuals is central in social responsibility, and this ethical principle is manifested in, for example, promoting the employment of persons with disabilities.

Co-operation between disability organizations and *FIBS* started as early as 2003 when a letter of intent was signed concerning the co-operation to promote the employment of disabled people. At the same time, the CVs of the first clients were put on display on the intranet of the members of *FIBS* for the companies to consider. However, it was only the project *Leap to Labour!* in 2006 that brought the necessary resources to arrange face-to-face meetings in order to match available jobs with suitable job seekers. The method was that the project manager contacted the enterprises, described the skills and special needs of the job seekers in detail and, if necessary, visited those enterprises with potential employees. The project created a website for collecting and sharing information⁴, and announcing vacant jobs. This website is still in action, and nowadays the activity has been extended to social media.

■ ■ ■ Mikko's story

Mikko is a man in his thirties with a rare congenital muscular disorder, *Ullrich congenital muscular dystrophy*. This muscular disorder affects Mikko's life in such a way that he moves slowly and cannot walk for long distances. Carrying a weight is difficult, and he is not able to pick things up from the

3 Diversity in working life and diversity management have lately been discussed in various publications. One of them is a guide on how to promote equality and prevent discrimination in the workplace, based on an initiative by the Finnish government. (www.tem.fi/index.phtml?s=4210).

4 The pages provide links to institutions that offer support, material about accessibility and equality, and information about organizations on disabilities and their umbrella organisation, *Vammaisfoorumi* (www.vammaisfoorumi.fi/content/view/3/3/). In addition, job seekers found advice on legislation regulating working on a pension.

floor. Tying his shoelaces is also rather difficult. Mikko graduated with a degree in Information Technology from Kajaani University of Applied Sciences. He is from the Kainuu region which is plagued by high unemployment rates. Mikko, among many others, was unemployed for about six months after graduating from the university of applied sciences.

For this reason he joined the *Leap to Labour!* project after learning about it from *Porräs*-magazine, a newsletter of the Neuromuscular Disorders Association. *Leap to Labour!* gathered information about job seekers among the members of different disability organizations in order to compile a register to be administered in Neuromuscular Disorders Association. Mikko had already prepared a CV and a template for job applications. The project manager of *Leap to Labour!* gave a comprehensive package of information about wage subsidies and open vacancies to Mikko, and additionally hints about where and how to get necessary aids.

Similarly, the enterprise that later hired Mikko was initially in contact with the project manager, hoping to find a skilled worker for an open vacancy. The project manager recommended Mikko, who sent his application immediately to the employer. Mikko's skills and the open vacancy of the employer were matched through the register administered by the Association, and thus the gates to the open labour market opened for Mikko.

Mikko's first workplace was a physiotherapy centre at the capital city, where he moved. The Employment and Economic Development Office of Mikko's hometown paid the expenses of the trip to the work interview, and when Mikko got the job, the same institution paid the wage subsidies to the employer. Financial administration, accountancy, personal ledger, invoicing and reporting were all Mikko's responsibility. Additionally, he was the PC advisor and administrator of the computer system, he installed programmes and devices, and did many kinds of office work. He worked for normal working hours. The employment contract was temporary at first, but soon it was made permanent.

The attitude of the employer was appropriate all the time. For the enterprise, only professional skills mattered, not the disability. For Mikko, it was important that all necessary equipment was near him and he could easily reach it from his desk. An accessible working environment was guaranteed



to Mikko and he got financial support for a special work chair. He travelled to work in his own car. Mikko got more responsible tasks as he got more experience, and it turned out that it was challenging new tasks that made him enjoy his work. Therefore he applied for a manager's post on the open labour market and got a job as an administrative manager at a medical centre. In this job, Mikko is in charge of the IT system of the company. The wage subsidy continues until March 2013, and his work chair was brought to his new office, which was re-arranged to meet Mikko's ergonomic requirements. Long-lasting means of support, which follow a disabled person's career steps (the wage subsidy and the chair in Mikko's case), lay a firm foundation for a disabled person to enter the open labour market.

■ ■ ■ **What made *Leap to Labour!* a good practice?**

Job seekers, such as Mikko, filled in a form at the homepage of the project (www.sisaanheitto.fi). They filled in their contact details, education, work experience, aspirations for the future, linguistic skills and computer skills. Furthermore the applicant chose if s/he was looking for a job or work experience placement. After this, the job seeker was interviewed to chart in greater detail her/his wishes and special needs, such as necessary aids, regulations regarding pension or a need for a job coach. The project manager contacted different enterprises and introduced the project and the job seekers to the potential employer. She also visited the workplace with the job seekers if necessary.

Some companies⁵ took the first step and contacted the project staff offering work or work experience placement. In these cases, the register of job seekers served as a database for finding good candidates. They were notified of the vacant positions and given instructions on applying for them. The open jobs were also announced on the project website, and information about them was spread by email to job coaches and the employment experts of disability organizations.

The project offered consulting⁶ to the employers on recruiting persons with

⁵ Temp service companies and members of *FIBS* were particularly active.

⁶ Employers needed counseling on recruiting, models for solving practical problems at the

disabilities. The employment specialists of *Vammaisfoorumi*⁷ visited the workplace when required – for example to check accessibility or to share information about different aids. Employers were also informed about different support mechanisms (wage subsidy, job coach, etc.) and they were helped in applying for them. In return their experiences were written down over a long period of time, so knowledge began to accumulate for the use of future actors. Some employers wished to have more information about different disabilities and their effect on work capacity.

It is nowadays generally accepted that diversity in human resources is an advantage for an employer⁸. A diverse group of employees makes a dynamic work team more likely than a very homogenous group of employees. Many of the supportive elements that people with disabilities need in order to work effectively will also benefit the well-being of other employees. And diverse staff is more sensitive to the different needs of different clients.

As a result of the project *Leap to Labour!*, some enterprises have changed their recruitment procedures. They have restructured their electronic application forms to help job seekers from the disability organizations. Some highlighted a positive attitude towards diversity in their job advertisements and designed job interviews in such a way that fair treatment was ensured for people with disabilities. *Positive discrimination* is a justified term for such actions.

People with disabilities may need extra encouragement in searching for a job. The project *Leap to Labour!* provided a “safe” search environment for those job seekers. The clients did not need to worry about such questions as what to tell potential employers and what they would think about a pen-

workplace and information on different forms of support.

⁷ *Vammaisfoorumi* is an umbrella organization of some 30 national disability organizations. It represents Finland in national and international co-operation of different kinds.

⁸ C. f. Mahmoud, Mertsu & Mahmoud, Maija (2007): *Monimuotoinen työyhteisö ja syrjimätön arki. Koulutusaineisto työpaikoille yhdenvertaisuuden edistämiseksi työelämässä*. Helsinki: SAK, EK, STTK ja Akava.

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sioner looking for a job. The support from the disability organizations was considered significant, and some organizations employed their members. Along with employment, other problems were solved as well, such as the personal assistant, taxi services, and independent housing.

The biggest novelty of this project was the co-operation between the network formed by disability organizations and the enterprises. Such action was unknown in Finland until 2006. The aim of the project was to test what would happen if the professional skills of people with disabilities were marketed by institutions highly specialized on this topic and able to give the correct information concerning the disabilities. Moreover it was considered important that the “barker” herself was a person with a disability, so she could directly influence the attitudes of the potential employers by offering a positive example with her academic education. To summarize, the project offered consulting services to employers on recruiting persons with disabilities, as wells as models on solving problems at the workplace, information about different forms of support, and a relatively large register of job seekers.

EXPERIENCE-BASED EXPERTS

Observations on the Employment Issues of Autism Spectrum Adults in Finland

Heta Pukki

Employment Taboos

Milla Ilonen

Observations on the Employment Issues of Autism Spectrum Adults in Finland

Heta Pukki

■ ■ ■ Introduction

I have difficulty trusting employment projects that do not show numbers. This is not because I am over-focused on numbers myself. Despite the stereotypes attached to the autism spectrum, they are nothing but a necessary evil to me. Very hard to remember, too.

I am aware of three projects that have been carried out by three separate organizations over the past fifteen years in my country, with the specific aim of improving the employment situation of people like me (1,2,3,4). More or less – I actually suspect that they have mainly focused on people with the same diagnosis but with significantly greater challenges in some areas. They never provided very precise definitions of their target groups. They might not have recognized me as one of their potential clients even if I had turned up at their doorstep at the time of those projects. Still, I had major problems with both finding and keeping jobs even as these projects were trying to work out the solutions to precisely those problems.

This is one reason why we need numbers. The boundaries of this group are hazy. Unless we specify, even if it is by crude measures like IQ or approximate size of vocabulary, we will not be able to even begin a conversation. We will not know if we are talking about the same people.

■ ■ ■ Results seem to disappear

I have ambiguous feelings about the projects. I can see that a lot of sincere effort went in and some useful observations came out. I wish people did pay more attention to the end results: the booklets, brochures and project reports, to learn and to find ways to improve on them. I am rather disappointed when I talk to an audience of people who are keenly interested in

these issues, have been for years, and find that hardly any of them have read all this output. For one thing, it shows that the projects have not succeeded very well in the dissemination part of their task. I believe these projects have been run by people with admirable skills in the areas of social work or special education or disability theory, who have been very good at networking and managing their projects, but who have, sadly, lacked in basic marketing skills. Or perhaps they have not been very eager to disseminate, in all cases. Two foundations that ran their own projects are offering employment support services, each based on their own model, and it is basically a product that they sell, as non-profits of course, but nonetheless.

■ ■ ■ **Who is entitled to be supported?**

A client who wants the services of this type of foundation has to go through a sort of filtering system. First, you have to find out that the service exists. This may require some initiative, since they are not widely advertised. You have to live in the right area, maybe move if this is not the case. Then you have to find the right people, the ones who can decide about paying for the service, and convince them that you are worth the investment. Not too disabled to benefit from it, but enough to be entitled. You can forget all about any social model of disability at this point, it's all about qualities that can be attached to you alone, at least seemingly. This can be hard with the more skilled end of the autism spectrum, where much of the disability may just vanish without a trace when attitudes change in the environment, so it helps if you have allies with a knack for eloquent and slightly exaggerated accounts of your deficits.

People who are already in the system somehow, who have been through special education or similar systems, their well-being becoming a matter of professional pride to someone, are at an advantage. People trying to argue for themselves, alone, are likely to have less of a chance, even if the need is just as great, and even if they were equally good as investments, or better than the ones with advocates.

Another thing that puzzles me is the lack of communication. There has been an active community of Asperger adults around for more than ten years. The projects have sometimes turned up at events organized by us when asked,

to briefly show their finished work. But why did they not engage this community while developing their models? Why not turn up in the early stages, just to bounce some ideas off us?

■ ■ ■ **A few words about the lack of numbers**

The biggest complaint I have, however, is about the lack of numbers. Any one of these organizations could have done a survey. They could have produced much needed data on how many of us are around needing help with employment issues. They could have asked what kind of support is usually offered, and how many find it useful. Failing this, they could have reported how many working hours and how much money went into supporting their pilot clients, and how all that effort was reflected in those clients' income and need for financial support. They did not. Anyone putting in the effort to get the services has to trust them blindly, just hoping that there is real and effective service at the end of the process.

For one thing, I would have personally appreciated the data because it would immediately have provided me with some more employment of my own kind. I would happily analyze and condense such information, wrap it up into presentations, and sell to anyone who needs it. I have been partly self-employed in this manner, covering other themes, for seven years. Other adults on the autism spectrum might appreciate the same information because it would help them to argue their case with the support system, with social workers and employment officials working with meager resources. I have recently heard about another project – of sorts – that could begin to produce the kind of data I have been looking for. I am cautiously optimistic. Could this be the one that looks at the big picture, thinks beyond the boundaries of a single organization and a project budget? This time it is about a Helsinki City supported employment unit cooperating (5) with a more generic 'labor force service centre' (6), which is run jointly by the city, labor administration and the national Social Insurance Institution. I hear they are making the autism spectrum a special focus of attention. This is promising because they are in a position to apply any good ideas and new models directly to a sizable group of clients. The threshold to their services is likely to be lower than to those run by the non-profit foundations. What I fear is that they might still only cover a small fraction of the spectrum.

The primary target group for the City unit is people with developmental disabilities. They have been expanding in the direction of AS, ADHD and dysphasia, but from their materials it is impossible to tell how extensively they plan to cover these large groups of people. And of course they are limited to just one city.

■ ■ ■ **Asperger's syndrome vanishes into statistics**

Some numbers that I have found worry me. A fairly recent Master's thesis study (7) tells us that workers in the regions surrounding our capital were aware of few clients with the Asperger diagnosis. Most such clients who were known to the workers received services on the basis of developmental disability, that is, learning difficulties of a very general and pervasive nature. Of the 23 clients identified as being, in some sense, members of the workforce, ten had been placed in day activity centers for the developmentally disabled, and four had sheltered jobs. That leaves only nine who were in situations I would normally associate with the *typical* Asperger adult – one *without* major, general learning difficulties. These nine were in paid employment either with or without support measures, or unemployed jobseekers. A survey on this scale is obviously not enough to provide a reliable picture of this entire group of people. It does tell us something though: that receiving the diagnosis, or receiving services based on it, or both, seem to be skewed in a certain way. This situation reinforces an impression in the workers' minds that they are dealing with a subtype of the developmentally-disabled group, needing only a slight adjustment of the developmental disability services to accommodate their additional quirks.

In my experience, having engaged in peer activities since the late 1990's, Asperger adults with no learning difficulties are often nobody's clients, at least until they develop mental health problems. At this point they may become interesting enough to appear in statistics, or rather disappear, since no diagnosis-specific information is available. Generally, they do not want to become clients of any service associated with developmental disabilities. It would just feel wrong, dishonest.

A recent statistics summary (8) from the VATES foundation, a major actor in the Finnish disability employment scene, gives a couple of interest-

ing figures. There are about 23 000 working-age people with developmental disabilities in Finland. At the end of 2011, about 18 000 people were receiving disability pension because of developmental disability. At the same time, there were almost 90 000 pensioned on the basis of belonging to one of rather diverse groups, all lumped together: schizophrenia, neuroses, and disorders of mood, personality or behavior. That leaves me to wonder where the autism spectrum is hiding in this picture. What proportion of those 90 000 people are Asperger/autistic, and what proportion of that 23 000, for that matter?

■ ■ ■ **Asperger's syndrome and work as a value**

Even if we take a rather conservative estimate of incidence (0,3 %), there should be over 11 000 working-age Asperger adults in Finland. Somehow I cannot imagine how this group, vast majority of them having intelligence in the normal range, could be adequately handled as a little aside in developmental disability services. Surveys in other countries have told us, over and over, that employment tends to be the first and foremost issue in the minds of AS or “high functioning autistic” adults, and that employment levels tend to be below even those of people considered severely disabled. This agrees with the feeling I have got from fifteen years of discussions with Finnish adults on the spectrum, from Empowerment seminars where the topic is a hardy perennial, never going away. Looking at individuals, it often seems to me that the employment problem *is* the disability, the only truly significant obstacle in an individual's life. Solve it, and other issues begin to solve themselves, to a point where you're left with a slightly peculiar person. It is not likely that only a minor part of this group wants services. It is actually quite likely that many are being served already, possibly over and over by different professionals, only in the wrong ways, adding to their confusion and despair.

I should know. I have experienced it first-hand, and second-hand through people close to me. I am now seeing the same happening to the (AS diagnosed) children of some (AS diagnosed) adults who were going through it fifteen years ago. I will offer some of my own experiences as an illustration, since they are the only ones at my disposal for public distribution.

■ ■ ■ **Personal experiences on the support system**

The general support system is pretty clueless. I challenged it to find gainful employment around 2002, with a brand new diagnosis that was at that time a relatively rare phenomenon in this country, at least for an adult able to walk in the street without assistance. I demanded to be admitted as a client of the 'special workforce advisor', since I was clearly now a 'special' case. They did not see it quite that way. The half-panicky, staring look of the worker is one of those things that stays with me for the rest of my life. I had failed in molecular biology, I told her, what should I do now? What services was I entitled to receive? I think most employment administration workers would still find it hard to give a quick answer.

What exactly was the nature of my functional deficit, or whatever you want to call it? Let's not get into that. It is irrelevant. I was unhappy, my employers were unhappy, and I believe one key factor in this unhappiness were those inborn qualities that have earned me the AS label. This happens on the autism spectrum, in various ways. It would prove nothing if I started recounting my particular embarrassments and catastrophes on paper. It would only serve to damage my chances of getting jobs in the future. Some would, and forever will, consider me a fraud and choose to believe that it is something, anything other than autistic traits that were at play.

Seeking help, I was sometimes faced with open anger. Do you want a sheltered job, someone bellowed at me, clearly meaning it as insult and intimidation. I did not know, since I had no idea how that worked. I just wanted something useful to do and a way to earn a living. Shelter sounded like a vaguely positive term and a thing that I could use. But I was obviously not supposed to have it, so I willingly agreed that it was not for me.

Somehow I made my way into an IT workshop where people were supposed to learn useful skills and plan their future. That was an utterly strange experience. The place was completely devoid of any supervision or management. People turned up, sat at the computers doing random things, and went away. One aggressive fellow played heavy metal all day, barely bothering to crank down the volume for a short time when people complained. After a while I started finding people already using the computer appointed to me when I arrived in the morning, or sitting down at it if I got up for a moment. They

said someone had just told them to use it. So I had no plan, no feedback on anything I did, and often not even a place to sit, with no explanation offered. One day I caught hold of the person who was supposed to run the place and told him that there were problems. I told him I had many skills and should be seriously attempting to get a job. The man's reaction is again one of those things that will stick with me for ever. He looked at me, slightly confused-looking eyes through big glasses, and said 'sometimes you just have to accept the fact that a job will never be found'. This guy doesn't even know me, I thought, and he is not managing his own job well. He has not bothered to have one conversation with me to find out what I can do and what I can't. Is his sole task to keep people tucked away out of sight, quiet, subdued, at minimum cost? Or is he just looking at my slight awkwardness of movement, voice, expression, and judging me to be hopeless on that basis? I could have tried to argue, but I found the whole place so depressing and unlikely to improve that I thought better of it and left.

Some years later I argued on behalf of a friend at the same place. There must have been ten people sitting in a circle (I always start calculating in my mind how much money is being spent on their wages in such meetings), seriously nodding as I explained that this man had useful skills. Do not have him sitting on a sofa drinking coffee all day for weeks and months, he will get depressed. Give him tasks, make him present them to small audiences, give him feedback. They could not have agreed more. And none of it ever happened. The basic philosophy of the place being, I suppose, that people with mental health problems – I doubt they would see Asperger's or autism as neurological disability – need lots of rest and relaxed chit-chat.

■ ■ ■ On the urgency of research

So I have difficulty trusting shiny brochures, reliable-looking professionals, the utter respectability of busy centers full of experts and clients sitting around doing something, or at least seeming to. I want the bottom line: What was accomplished today? How many were actually supported into real employment this year? How happy were they with their new jobs? How happy were the employers? It is not impossible to collect that information. It should be quite easy, in fact. It has been done in Great Britain, with the Prospects services (9, 10), and in the US, with their state-run rehabilitative

employment services (11, 12). The Swedish know that many of their young adults with Asperger's ended up receiving "*aktivitetsersättning*", a financial support form that turned out to be a bad idea (13). That is a start. Once you have at least looked into something enough to know it produced unwanted results, you can start finding something better, and avoid making the same mistakes.

■ ■ ■ **How I solved my problem of employment**

In the end, I found my solutions with the help of my relatives and a workforce advisor who claimed no special expertise on the autism spectrum, but had a lot of common sense and an understanding of the academic job market. I received support to start a small business. As a concession to special needs, this was extended somewhat past the standard period. I also received financial help from a small association that supports all kinds of disabled people to buy equipment and get training that will directly improve their chances of becoming employed (14). Such systems are based on the idea of people being experts on their own lives, needing to follow their own motivation and initiative, not always needing other expertise to tell them what will help them most. I see the same association continuously handing away money and computers, a considerable proportion of the recipients being in the Asperger, ADHD and other neurological categories. I would love to see some research done on this, too; how effective might this be, compared to the systems run by the state, cities, non-profit foundations? Maybe it would be a good idea for larger organizations to pick up this utterly simple model.

The support I received was life-changing, crucially important, but it has not been a perfect solution. It has allowed me to struggle along on the edges of the job market, taking temporary jobs, then falling back on the business if the environment threatened to disable me again. This is something I have seen with other Asperger adults my own age, too. There are no happy endings. There is a continuous process of finding new solutions. New challenges emerge as we turn forty or fifty and lose the energy to maintain some of the coping mechanisms, the fake facades we have set up to survive when we were younger. Therefore, we do not just need projects. We need understanding and solutions that can be integrated firmly into the general workforce administration, into work-related health care. We need services we can ac-

cess over and over, as the need arises, without requiring advocates to beg for some special kind of funding to buy that service every time. Only then we can begin to contribute to our communities and families as we should, naturally and continuously, with all our abilities and skills.

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■ ■ ■ Heta Pukki: Personal Introduction



I am in many ways a very ordinary middle-aged mother of two, living in a suburb in the capital region. It is difficult for me to give any single, precise professional title that would explain what I do. I studied biology when I was younger, but failed utterly in building a career. I believe the biggest cause was an undiagnosed autism spectrum condition and associated problems, small in themselves but growing out of proportion because they were misinterpreted, by me as well as others. This resulted in mental health problems. I did not receive an 'official' diagnosis until I was in my early thirties. I have mixed feelings about defining myself as disabled, as do many other people on the autism spectrum: I believe that the exact same autistic characteristics that sometimes cause challenges in my life can be, in certain situations, quite beneficial. I suffer from the disapproval and moral judgement of other people more than I suffer from the relatively mild autistic characteristics in themselves.

I am extremely lucky in that I have had the chance to build a second career. I got to study special education, specializing in adults on the autism spectrum, at the University of Birmingham in Great Britain. I received my M.Ed. degree in 2009. These studies and my experience on the NGO front have given me knowledge and experience that Finnish autism professionals seem to need, every now and then. For a few years I have worked as translator, lecturer and occasional consultant, and published some literature. Lately, I have also worked as an assistant to autistic children with general developmental disabilities.

I have been an active member of autism associations since the 1990's, which has given me a front row seat to some fascinating processes. I contributed to starting peer groups for adults on the spectrum at a time when these diagnoses were just starting to become more common among people who can live independently and participate in such activities. With a few others, I planned the first events where we started publicly speaking about our views. I was on

the board of the Finnish Association for Autism and Asperger Syndrome when we started a committee to plan our own Empowerment Project. These days I'm more on the sidelines, watching with interest as younger people are taking this process in interesting new directions.

Employment Taboos

Milla Ilonen

When I was born, I was diagnosed with a rare disability that affects the functioning of my joints and muscles. At the age of three I got my first wheelchair, a pink one – cute as candy! I started school in a mainstream classroom with my non-disabled age peers. During recess, we played mirror and tag and rubber band skipping. I skipped too, in my own way. Excursion days were the best! With my personal assistant I got to go wherever the others went, all the way from King's Hall at Turku Castle to the depths of a metal mine. My free time was spent in children's afternoon art clubs, at the swimming pools, at the school choir, at the youth center and in discos.



In my teen years, my circle of friends grew and I developed a powerful need to become independent of my childhood home. In the summers I camped out. I met peers with whom it was easy to talk about the issues of growing up to be a woman. In my high school years I got my first summer job, traveled around to festivals, had the biggest crush ever, and thought about the future choice of a profession. I ran many groups, and NGO work became an important part of my life. A couple of years later I was admitted to university, moved by myself into a rented studio apartment, gave at least five house-warming parties, and enjoyed the distractions of student life. Getting my own car allowed me move more freely, and my sphere of life expanded ever further.

Wasn't this contribution supposed to be about finding employment? Here I am just boasting about the high points of my childhood and memories of

my youth, filled with happiness and a sense of inclusion. To prove that my academic skills have not gone rusty I will present a hypothesis: I dare to suggest that early experiences of identity, and of self as part of a community, are highly significant to the construction of inclusion in working life.

■ ■ ■ **The power of shared experiences**

Since disabled people are a very heterogeneous group, all of them will not have a similar story to tell. Some experience their disability as a difficult thing – some as something easy. Where one person is inspired, another becomes anxious. And while someone is always in a bad mood, another one may exude positive energy. So it is impossible to generalize, to claim that all disabled people are cheerful, bubbly, bitter, difficult, losers or heroes. It is also impossible to prove that disability has no real part in these interpretations that primarily concern our personalities.

On the other hand, it is possible to find many similarities in the varied life stories of different people. The kind of elements that strengthen our sense of being peers, things that make us cry out: “I know exactly how you feel!” In an atmosphere of peer support we can share not only joys and successes, but also hard and painful experiences. Understanding these experiences can be challenging for the outsiders.

In this article, I will make claims about working life, claims that may not often be stated openly. It is not considered proper to say some things out loud, or people may not find the will to say them, or these things are just generally not discussed. Because of this, I call my statements taboos. The word *taboo* comes from the Tongan language. It means *holy* and *forbidden*. Although work is, in these times of high unemployment, temporary jobs, business bankruptcy and general uncertainty, something quite holy indeed, I hope that discussing it – as a basic right for disabled people – will never become forbidden.

■ ■ ■ **About ‘quality of life services’, and the lack of them**

I give lectures to professionals in the social, health and educational field an-

nally. I talk about *quality of life services*: about functioning assistive devices, personal assistance, rehabilitation and transportation services, and about equal opportunities to get an education and to earn a living. As part of my presentation, I show photographs. In a demonstration held seven years ago, we demanded that personal assistance should be made an unconditional right. In one photo, a group of disabled people are gathered in front of the Parliament building with banners and signboards attached to their wheelchairs. Some are wearing a shirt sporting a garish text: “Without an assistant I would be naked!” The demonstration has an effect – Members of Parliament come to us, hear what we say, and maybe even listen. Although the discussion is sensible and constructive, the political atmosphere has its ironic twists. “Couldn’t we proceed one thing at a time? We just did give you an unconditional right to day activities”, says one MP. Indeed – I suppose *we* should be profoundly grateful now!

Many MPs demonstrate how they are a light year behind the current developments concerning equal rights for disabled people. Or are we just asking for too much? We demand to get out of bed every single day (including weekends), we demand to have clothes on (also when attending the so-called day activities) – we demand help to manage everyday tasks that are completely ordinary. Quality of life does not mean glamour or luxuries. Quality of life means, among other things, employment – which is an excellent form of social security.

Back then, at the demonstration, having just started my university studies, I was gripped by a feeling of perplexing anger. Is this how people see us, the disabled? Should we all participate in day activities? Where will I end up when I graduate from the university? Why won’t anyone do anything to help us get real jobs, to become part of the open job market? Some people just need to be given more in order to receive the same as others. Fortunately, at least personal assistance is nowadays an unconditional right for people with severe disabilities living in Finland.

■ ■ ■ **About the pensioner-generating syndrome**

In Finland, people with severe disabilities start receiving disability pension (or ‘rehabilitation support’) from the Social Insurance Institution as they

turn 16. In the mental landscape of a teenager, his or her own money is of course something purely positive. What is not quite so good is the kind of stigma resulting from being a pensioner. By ‘stigma’ I mean a social label that forces a person to either perform or hide self. Even though our individualistic climate is epitomized by self-aggrandizement, not every kind of deviation from the norm is generally accepted, let alone valued. Young disabled people have to negotiate matters concerning their identity on many fronts: at home, at school, at hobbies, in the circle of friends, and in public spaces.¹

As we encounter other people, we often introduce ourselves in terms of our professional identity. I, too, introduce myself as coordinator, youth worker, social psychologist, group facilitator, and through the roles I have acquired in positions of responsibility. In my work, I constantly meet young disabled people who introduce themselves as pensioners. While some have a tone of voice that suggests amusement at being a pensioner at an early age, others describe their situation with embarrassment. Because no one shows concern about the inactivity of disabled people in our society, no one thinks of questioning the pensioner discourse. No one finds it strange that a young disability pensioner just drifts from day to day without anything much planned for the future. By paying the pension, young people are kind of dismissed: the pension buys their absence from vocational training, working life and, finally, the entire society. When a young person internalizes this mode of thinking, “I’m not good enough to work”, vocational training becomes useless, and the pensioner-generating process can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.²

In the job market, people have started talking about personal branding – the need for every employee to commercialize their own persona. Many reality TV shows are based on the same idea. Young contestants are taught to package themselves into exorbitantly commercial brands, mosaics of ideal qualities that promote sales as effectively as possible.³ Are young pensioners part of this competition, as desirable and welcome participants? Do they offer their employer their skills or the limitations caused by their disability? If I was an employer, I would not hire “spasticity of lower limbs” or “severe neurological disorder”. Instead, I might be quite interested in increasing the *experiential*

1 Talib and Lipponen 2008, 161.

2 Loijas, 2000.

3 Oksanen 2008, 47.

expertise or diversity skills of my workplace team. Competitive advantages – ones that non-disabled applicants do not necessarily have! Finding employment is, therefore, also down to our own attitudes! If we could find alternative identities through leisure activities, positions of responsibility, or the voluntary work front, employers might see us differently – as capable people who are not afraid of doing things! I believe that having broad experience of voluntary work helps in getting the first jobs, particularly. I got my first summer job when I was 17, on Red Cross day camps. People trusted me, as I had acted as group leader, tutor, member of youth activity planning groups and event organizer. I also had certificates that proved how active I had been. For the first summer, I got minimal pay, but the next summer I was already seeking employment with one more experience behind me.

We disabled people also tend to be nice to a fault. We complain about the discrimination we have experienced in the workplace, mainly in peer group meetings, but when facing the real situation, we do not dare call the police. We will not file discrimination reports. We apologize too much and think that we are a burden. Oh, and of course – if a wise doctor tells us that we are unable to work, we accept it without questioning. We think these doctor's orders are a life sentence, given before we even had time to start planning the future. We submit to the idea of someone else always knows things better than we do.

■ ■ ■ **About the fear of positive discrimination**

Do you know any disabled actors? How about pastors? Pop stars? Or teachers? Are there disabled people to be seen on TV programs? And what about customer service jobs; clothing stores, libraries, concert halls or cafés? I have had the pleasure of getting to know disabled people who are employed and live successful lives. A confirmation school pastor who uses an electric wheelchair taught me spiritual values. A visually impaired youth worker helped to arrange blind dates. A career advisor with short stature encouraged me to break the internal boundaries in my mind and to seek entrance to the university, over and over again. A car salesman who sat in a wheelchair knew exactly what kind of assistive devices would be right for my first car. Last summer I met a dance instructor with a communication impairment and realized something important. “If you can breathe, you can dance”,

the teacher told us through the speech interpreter. Then we danced, as an ordinary bunch of diverse people.

“If you are able to want, you are able to do anything”, I recently encouraged a young person with a muscular disease who was considering his chances of getting to study at a college for actors. The test on acrobatics could surely be replaced with some kind of test that’s appropriate for him, and soon we would be able to admire him in spotlights on theatre stages. The college was not quite as optimistic. There is a tendency to steer young people with disabilities into fields where they do not have to be seen too much, or to have contact with other people. An expert once suggested that disabled people could work at mall surveillance. The task would be to watch a camera like a hawk and press an alarm button as soon as a criminal appeared on the screen. As a member of the very same category of “disabled people”, I would actually like to stop the villains myself, meet them face to face and ask what their problem is. Crime rates would surely go down as they would all be terrified by the guard hurtling around in her electric wheelchair.

Almost without exception, anyone can be admitted to the Business and Administration or Computer Science courses of special education colleges. Our suitability to other positions, be it study or employment, is measured by a variety of the most peculiar tests imaginable⁴. For example, one important skill is to be able to twist metal wire into the shape of a bunny. If you run out of wire as you are working on the second ear, you may kiss your career ambitions goodbye! A smart applicant is able to deduce that the problem is in the environment. An environment with limited ability leaves no room for equality. (As we, people with disabilities, are not at all limited in our ability to work!)

Would it generate equality in working life if all disabled people were given jobs, independent of their competence? Should every organization have a quota of a few disabled employees? Or should any attention be paid to an applicant’s disability, at all? Many organizations have not thought about their stance on this yet. People fear that positive discrimination would cause resentment among those who do not need any special treatment on the basis

⁴ More thoughts by me on testing inability vs. ability to work can be found in the It newsletter by Invalidiliitto, issue 2/2013 (in Finnish) www.it-lehti.fi/portal/verkkolehti/?a=getArticle&issueId=78&articleId=960

of their origin, disability, beliefs or any such characteristic. But surely positive discrimination cannot harm anyone?

Personally, I have always felt uncomfortable about workplaces and centers meant for disabled people only. I want to be part of the normal and the ordinary. An exception to this is the association *Kynnys* (The Threshold Association), built on the principles of the *Independent Living* movement, promoting the basic and human rights of disabled people in Finland. I act as vice chairman of this association. Strictly speaking, *Kynnys* is not “for disabled people only” – as recruiting has been done, the disabled applicants have just happened to have more to offer in terms of the organization’s ideology and functioning. At *Kynnys*, skilled employees with various kinds of disabilities perform work on every level: as directors, lawyers, office workers, cleaners and coordinators. Work is approached with your skills up front, and you cannot come and work at *Kynnys* without showing solid workmanship in your field!

Unlike *Kynnys*, many Finnish disability organizations seem to be afraid of positive discrimination. The training events, groups and “*sopeutumisvalmennus*” (the so-called adjustment coaching) courses arranged by these organizations are typically run by non-disabled people. Disabled people do act as voluntary workers and provide peer support, but few of them are ever employed by the organization. The world of the non-disabled is still the norm, and disabled people are coached to help them become adjusted to it. Some disability organizations are also quite ignorant of other types of discrimination, let alone discrimination based on multiple factors, phenomena that some of their members have to face. A charitable organization with elderly administrators cannot comprehend the idea that a young disabled immigrant or a transsexual person recovering from mental health problems may harbor hopes of becoming the organization’s executive director.

My own know-how on equality and diversity grew considerably when I got to participate in the equality planning process of *Finnish Youth Cooperation – Allianssi*. At that time, I worked for *Allianssi* in a project that assessed equality-promoting youth work, and I took part in the groundwork for the process. We offered the process to youth organizations that were members of *Allianssi*, as an opportunity for experiential learning. Gaining new insight together generated the kind of understanding I had not experienced even

during my university studies. We realized that equality is not probability math. Diversity exists even if it isn't always visible to us on the surface. We realized that wishing people welcome is not enough, and that to remove obstacles we need systematic work. We also realized that equality is for everyone. Promoting equality cannot be the responsibility of individual people or isolated special needs groups alone.

If my employment at my current workplace, the *Housing Services Association ASPA*, ever comes to an end, I will not hesitate to apply for work at *Allianssi* again. In every recruiting advert the organization publishes, be it new staff members or positions of trust, they include this sentence: "We hope to see applicants of different ages and genders, as well as ones representing language, cultural and other minorities". This wish in itself does not obligate the employer to apply positive discrimination in the selection process. It does, however, signal that this is a pluralistic workplace community where all kinds of differences are respected.

■ ■ ■ **Dreaming of real work**

One autumn morning two years ago I woke up to my phone vibrating. My previous employer from *ASPA* suggested that I come back to work for them. To be honest, this was one of the best phone calls in my entire life! I had been employed at *ASPA* previously for a couple of years, in a project that developed personal assistance services. Now there was a job on offer that had to do with the quality of residential services, strengthening participation. I did not need to ponder for long whether I wanted this job or not. Who would not want to work in a community where everyone's competence and expertise is valued? Where it is enough to be yourself. Where services are developed with the help of experiential expertise. And where good leadership generates an inspiring atmosphere for doing and experiencing things together.

There are many pearls in my employment history, all the way from selling ice cream at a youth café to doing product presentations of stuffed toys at day care centers and hospitals. I have worked as the secretary in charge of equality issues at a workplace that I could not access with a wheelchair. Coffee breaks were lonely, and I never got to meet all my coworkers. As summer

trainee at a child support bureau I found out that shifting numbers around was not my thing. These different experiences have shown me that work is not fun or easy every day, and it doesn't have to be. I would not give up any of my experiences, since every one of them has brought me closer to my dream job and my dream workplace.

I am often amazed at how surprised and delighted people are when I tell them that I am employed at a real job. That no one has to entertain me, or come up with some sort of pleasant tinkering for me to engage in on rainy days. And that I work primarily to earn my living and to be able to have a financially independent, autonomous life. I wonder why they find this such a positive surprise, as I have been under the impression that working should be a perfectly natural part of life at age 30, just like having a relationship, being sexually active, and having children. Behind the surprised delight lurk some warped attitudes. After one seminar on youth work, a certain official came to pat me on the shoulder and said: "It is so wonderful that day activity centers like *Allianssi* have been created for you crippled and feeble-minded people." With this thoughtless comment, she managed to label not only my 30 colleagues but 116 organizations in the fields of youth work and education, organizations that *Allianssi* represents.

Attitudes do not change unless people dare to speak out about them. It is not self-evident that everyone will cheer for disabled people's right to participation, employment and freedom to choose their lifestyle. The more severe the disability, the more easily people resort to ideas of segregation, special services in special institutions. If even individualized living in regular residential buildings cannot become a reality, we need not wonder why the wish to have a real job remains nothing but a distant dream for so many.

As a child I daydreamed of being exempted from housework. I was not – and I am glad that it was so. My parents treated me and my non-disabled sister equally. We had to clean our own rooms and participate regularly in vacuuming, washing dishes, cleaning the bathroom and other chores. Although housework was never my favorite, doing it felt proper and important. I believe that the industriousness, perseverance and sense of capability I learned at home have had a far-reaching effect in terms of my later employability.

Assuming responsibility is part of full citizenship. Responsibility often results in freedom and choices; freedom to go to the corner store with the allowance earned from housework, and choosing something personally satisfying. Or, freedom to work in a job in which you can follow the values that are important to you.

It is also important to desire! Do not do anything that you do not want to, but nevertheless also train yourself to want to do things.

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See also:

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Decent Work: Promising practices in the Employment of People with Disabilities from Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, and Finland

This book looks at promising employment practices for people with disabilities that have been developed in Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, and Finland. It can be challenging to find a job in the open labour market for a person with disabilities or reduced work capability. The stories collected in this book show how it can be done, however, and what kind of factors (having to do with the person seeking employment as well as methods of outside support) have proved to be beneficial.

The successful path to employment is constructed by several components. Some of the building blocks begin to be formed already during the early youth, through the construction of personal identity built on the idea of one's participation in the society. The formation of the successful path also requires actions and changes from outside. In addition to the appropriate support forms and recruitment practices, what is needed is a change in the social attitudes towards disability. Things have already begun to change for the better, as shown in the book.

The message of the book is, simply, that finding work is possible, and that recruiting will pay off!

The examples given in the book encourage everyone to find a decent job, with an appropriate salary, and thus to become a part of work community and of society.

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