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The realization of the “supported employment for mentally disabled people – trainer “ programme

Mentally disabled people are the most discriminated group on the open labour market. To change this difficult situation, we must overcome the stereotypes, such as the conviction that their work lacks or has a very low value. In the times of debates on improving the quality of life of mentally disabled people we must underline the importance of work as a factor, which strengthens the self-estimation and helps to reach a certain level of autonomy.

The idea of supporting mentally disabled people on the open labour market with the help of qualified instructors (trainers) – the so called “job coaching” – was originated in the USA in the 80's. That model was based on the change of attitude towards the services of work activation of this group of people from traditional: “train – employ” into the consistent with the process of supported employment: “employ – train – keep”. In the process of employment the most important is the rule: “as much support as necessary, as much independence and autonomy as possible”¹.

The programme of supported employment in Wroclaw is based on the model of the Supported Employment Agency from North Carolina (USA) – the organisational unit of the Meklenburg Open Door. Like in the USA, the Wroclaw Regional Council of Disabled People as a non-governmental organisation is the executor of the programme. Also in the European Union countries similar programmes are being initiated and realised by civil, non-profit organisations with help and support of local authorities. Both, in the USA and in the European countries, programmes of supported employment are the integral part of the system of social and work rehabilitation of the disabled people. In the USA they are financed from the state's resources and from local authorities' budget, in Germany from the sources of employment offices and institutions of social insurance. The project in Wroclaw was started in the year 2001 and is financed by the municipality. Currently six trainers take part in it. They managed to prepare 38 people to work among whom 25 are constantly employed.

The project is periodically evaluated by the coordinator of the undertaking – Mrs Małgorzata Gorący. Nevertheless, the idea of researching the effectiveness of supported employment from the point of view of the employed, trainers, employers and co-workers by a non-involved subject was seen by its coordinators as interesting and important. The research

1 www.wson.wroc.pl (supported employment)

was started in 2007 by the students of the Institute of Education (department of rehabilitation) under the guidance of the author of this article.

In the research the qualitative and quantitative methods were assumed. The qualitative research was applied towards the employed people and their trainers – conversations were conducted and with the more communicative disabled people even long dialogues. Chosen methods gave the opportunity to analyse the programme’s realisation and to penetrate deeply into the situation of the employed people and their trainers.

However, this method occurred to be impossible to use towards their co-workers and employers. The system of work, huge amount of people (89) and the lack of time – were the factors that pointed to another method of research. The above mentioned respondents were diagnosed with the use of the quantitative method - the questionnaire.

The main problem of the research took the form of the question:

What are the effects of the “Supported employment for mentally disabled people – trainer” programme?

In addition it was elaborated into more detailed questions:

1. What results of the employment on the open labour market do these mentally disabled people experience? (in personal, working, family and economical aspects)
2. How do the employers assess the programme?
3. How are the mentally disabled people assessed as employees by employers?
4. What is the co-workers’ attitude towards the disabled people as their colleagues?
5. What is the trainers' point of view on the advantages and disadvantages of the programme?

The assessed group consisted of:

- 15 mentally disabled people who occupied many different posts in enterprises and establishments in Wroclaw (KFC, McDonald, Pizza Hut, Hotel Holiday Inn, Albert shops, MOPS, DPS, Boarding house for elder people),
- 67 co-workers (from the above mentioned places)
- 12 employers (or people responsible for employment in those places)
- five trainers who prepared the disabled people to do their job

The results of the open market employment, experienced by the assessed mentally disabled people

All the respondents were satisfied with the fact of starting and continuing work, mostly by the fact of earning money, which had the decisive influence on their gaining of

independence and financial autonomy. The family usually makes them feel that they ought to participate in their own and family's living expenses. Some parents mobilise their children to save (for example, on their own bank accounts) so that, in the future, they will be able to spend the money in a rational way. However, in some cases, the parents take all the earnings, leaving only small amounts to their grown-up sons or daughters.

All the assessed people have finished vocational schools and most of them tried to work in supported employment enterprises but without success. The process of getting used to their work duties within the *trainer* programme, made them feel that they are able to work and have a chance to become employed on the free market.

According to the trainers, the employees overcame many difficulties concerning the organisation of work. They are better at planning and coping with the situations when one problem overlaps with another. The respondents do not evaluate the activities they undertake – they never say what they like or do not like doing in their work, they are even surprised by such a question – “work is work and you have to do it”. The biggest problem appears when the increased number of customers creates a lot of overlapping tasks or the co-workers ask them to do things which are different from the standards they had learned at schools.

The families of the disabled employees most frequently were satisfied with such a change in their lives, although, at the beginning they were concerned for their sons and daughters success and afraid they would be exploited at work.

Work on the open market and contacts with young people caused that their circle of friends extended beyond the people met in Occupational Therapy Workshops (WTZ). However in comparison to the opinions of co-workers, it occurred that young disabled employees have problems with differentiation between their own emotional states and emotional states of others, often confusing the ordinary symptoms of liking with the harbingers of friendship and closer relationships. That is why it appeared that a part of respondents gave up or limited contacts with the friends from WTZ, saying they do not have time for the meetings (“because I work shifts”).

On starting and continuing work, the assessed people claimed to be ready to create their own families. All of them have such a dream which is most frequently disapproved by their parents, because this aspect of their children's maturity is seen as the most difficult to accept. That is why they usually forbid and strictly control their children's close contacts with other sexes.

The respondents like different free-time activities, although these are always connected with other members of the family or activities organised within the occupational therapy workshops.

The employers' assessment of the programme

The employers have mostly judged the realisation of the programme to be very good (75%) and good (25%). Asked about the trainer's role, they said that it was indispensable (50%) also for other co-workers and that all the trainers were special (25%) and admired by the others (10%). Among the benefits for their enterprises from the employment of mentally disabled people, they mentioned the gain of good employees, who are accepted by the staff and underlined the higher involvement of other employees who can be relieved from simple but time-consuming activities. They also listed some social advantages, like the positive influence of work on the mentally disabled people.

The majority of employers are ready to employ more such people (60%), others think that they have no more places in their companies. As arguments that convinced them to employ disabled people they mentioned: helping these people (“we should give them a chance”) – 41%, the trainers’ involvement in the programme (33%) and the fact that it was a challenge for the rest of the employees (26%).

How are the mentally disabled people assessed as employees by employers?

Half of the employers never had any contact with mentally disabled people and 66% never came across their professional activity. Asked about their reaction to such employees, they specified: challenge (58%), curiosity (41,5%), satisfaction (25%), uncertainty (25%), anxiety (15%). Among the features that predispose these people to become valuable employees they mentioned: engagement (50%), reliability and precision (25%), honesty and feasibility (25%), sincerity and frankness (25%) and doing good work (25%).

75% of respondents claimed that there have never been any conflicts among the staff concerning the employment of a mentally disabled person and 17% said that they had to cope with such a problem. None of the employers had noticed any activities of the disabled people that could have bad influence on the company’s reputation.

Co-workers' attitude towards the disabled people as their colleagues.

Over half of respondents did not have any contact with mentally disabled people. Like the employers, they reacted with curiosity (36%) to the fact that mentally disabled person was going to be employed, some regarded it as a challenge (35%) and 25 % claimed to be pleased

with this project, other 23% claimed that there was no difference between working with a disabled or healthy person. It may prove that the people questioned were very tolerant.

Comparatively interesting data was obtained concerning the relations between these groups of employees. Over a half of respondents contacts and talks to mentally disabled people not only about things connected with their professional duties. A great majority, however, limits these contacts to the place of work not extending any closer contacts beyond it; only 4,5% has confirmed doing so. These results are not too optimistic, although on the other hand, looking at the people working together without distinguishing into disabled and healthy, the percentage of people extending their positive relations beyond the place of work is not much higher.

Taking into consideration our society's point of view on tolerance and acceptance, it is satisfying that only 1,5% of co-workers admits that they avoid their mentally disabled friends. There are also positive outcomes concerning the co-workers' attitude towards the disabled employees – 85% of them does not notice any signs of aversion and 15% does, and these usually are: ignorance, teasing, demonstrating superiority and contempt, mockery, brusqueness and exploitation at work.

The work of disabled people is judged by the co-workers as: good (47,7%), very good (38,8%) while only 16,4 % does not find it satisfactory. According to 91% of respondents, employers do not distinguish among their subordinates and they treat mentally disabled and healthy people as equal, other 9% claim that disabled people are more kindly treated and have some extra privileges (2 respondents) or that they are discriminated (1 respondent) or that employers have wrong attitude towards them (1 respondent).

The programme itself is very well judged by 52% of the questioned co-workers and well estimated by 32,8% of them. In addition, they reckon that trainers play the most important role in the realisation of the supported employment programme.

The trainers' point of view on advantages and disadvantages of the programme

People who work as trainers (whose task is to prepare mentally disabled pupils to work) see a lot of positive aspects in their job. The most important thing is that they feel satisfied with their involvement in the programme, particularly with taking part in the professional and personal development of their pupils. They think that working with people helps them to meet new people and gain valuable experience (both interpersonal and individual). With reference to social advantages, they underline a huge role of the project (and themselves) in rejecting the stereotypes concerning the disabled people.

Objective statements also relate to the disadvantages of the whole undertaking. In the analysed project, trainers found it difficult to overcome some technological and organisational problems, which result from as yet underdeveloped base. Some of the problems mentioned were: the obligation to work on many different posts, too many pupils because of the insufficient number of people trained to work as trainers, tiring journeys to places of work, often situated in distant parts of the city, low salaries and many extra expenses. In the personal and family aspects these people underlined the importance of required availability, which may sometimes disturb their private lives. The above mentioned disadvantages of the trainer's work may, in time, become the catalysts for professional burn-out.

To sum up the results of the research, it must be stated that the "supported employment of mentally disabled people – trainer" programme is an alternative for other weaker ways for the employment of this group of the disabled and it is very important that it concerns the free labour market. The realisation of the programme was received positively and kindly by the employers and co-workers of the programme's participants.

The most important benefits of supported employment on the free labour market in personal, working, family and social dimension are derived by the mentally disabled people. The trainer's work was also recognised (by all groups of the respondents) as very important. It can be very satisfying, however we must take into consideration that some of the disadvantages may result in the crisis called "professional burn-out".

References:

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2. www.wson.wroc.pl