

EPR Public Affairs Event

Pathways to Employment: analysing policy and practice

24th October 2022 (14:30 – 17:45 CET)

Brussels/Zoom

Report

Welcome and introductory remarks

Laura welcomed participants and gave the floor to Patrick Ruppel for the introductory remarks. Patrick thanked participants in person and online for joining. He mentioned three keywords: 27%, which is the employment gap of people with disabilities in Europe, SDT – self-determination theory, according to which having a meaning in life is what motivates people, and ABC – autonomy, belonging and competence, which is the basis of all interventions and of the seminar as well. He stressed that reducing the unemployment gap and overcoming the bottlenecks in the labour market are tasks for all actors including employers, services providers and EPR itself. He also pointed out the importance of cooperation with PES (Public Employment Services) and support to employers.

Presentation of key findings and analysis of the publication “Pathways to employment”

Laura and Giada made a [presentation](#) on the study “Pathways to employment” that EPR has developed with the support of the EPR Taskforce on pathways to employment. Laura in particular explained the aims and audiences of the publication, which focuses on policies and employment models supporting transitions of people with disabilities into the open labour market. She mentioned the UN CRPD General Comment 8 on Art. 27 on the right to work of people with disabilities as a framework document for both the study and future policies, explaining how the publication addresses key elements of the Comment. She then proceeded to highlight the main features and success factors of the most common policy frameworks. Giada continued the presentation by presenting the employment models analysed and their success factors. She concluded by highlighting the key recommendations developed in the publication.

Q&A

Laura opened the floor to participants for questions. Furio Gramatica from Fondazione Don Gnocchi asked what kind of support is available to companies willing to implement a place-then-train approach with people with disabilities, especially to those which are not used to working with them. Laura remarked that ensuring support to companies is a key topic and the context varies greatly across countries. Supported Employment focuses on long-term support through job coaches, but job coaching can also be used before the person joins the company. In this case having a service provider offering advice on what tasks suit best the person can help. She pointed out that a train-then-place approach can also be adopted depending on the skills needed and that employer and employee should be able to choose the model that works best for them. Support should be provided through a system in place, mainly by the government.

Mario Verzele from GTB added that in Supported Employment the employer is also a customer for the job coach. Moreover, trade unions and employers organisations can support them, although there is still a lot of work to do. Laura observed that one comment on the publication was about mentoring within companies and identifying people directly within the company for peer-to-peer support. Sabina Lobato from ONCE intervened by underlining the importance of including in the publication the role of employers forums, as there are national networks of companies committed to disabilities whose experiences can help other employers.

Laura commented that there are many good practices on this topic which could fill a separate publication, and that EPR aims to update its Toolkit on partnerships with employers in the next year with the help of the Disability Management/Return to Work WG, and will feed in the proposals and reflections on this topic into that work.

Presentation of the Disability Employment Package and the PES Network Toolkit

Monika Chaba from DG EMPL of the European Commission made a [presentation](#) on the disability employment package. She remarked that the EPR's event is very timely as it aligns well with the Commission's work programme. She explained that the Disability Employment Package is different from all the previous initiatives because it's not a communication or a recommendation, but they want to create a hub with centralised information and learning opportunities, guidance and good practices that the Commission wants to put together between now and 2024 with the aim to improve the rate of employment of people with disabilities. She then proceeded to illustrate the 6 key themes of the Package and their deliverables, stressing this is a joint initiative developed with social partners, mainly through the Disability Platform. A [website](#) about the Package is already available to gather all the information and deliverables developed.

Yasmin Salem, Policy Officer from the European Commission in the unit supporting the Public Employment Network, presented the [Toolkit of the PES Network](#). She first introduced the PES Network, which aims to strengthen cooperation between the European PES, underlining the significant role PES can play to promote inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market and the ways to achieve it (e.g. through cooperation with NGOs, provision of guidance and engagement with employers). Yasmin then introduced the newly launched Toolkit, which offers guidance and practices from more than 20 countries on 6 areas including internal HR measures, reasonable accommodation and partnerships with employers and NGOs, and proposes 5 concrete steps to implement inclusion measures. She pointed out the importance of involving staff and creating commitment in order to create a truly inclusive environment. Lastly, Yasmin mentioned the PES Network podcast, which publishes monthly episodes about several topics, including inclusive workplaces as in [episode 14](#).

Q&A

Laura thanked Yasmin and informed her that EPR is part of the Inclusive Labour Market Alliance informal network, and together with its partners would like to cooperate with the PES Network next year. Both agreed that this first meeting can be an initial step towards future and better partnerships.

A question was asked online by Dimitris Tourlidas from Margarita (Greece), who asked what PES can do to support vulnerable people in countries without full legislation on Supported Employment. Yasmin replied that the Greek PES is working a lot on supporting people with disabilities and she would be happy to put him in touch with them. Mario Verzele commented that having a partnership with the PES can be very meaningful, as in the case of SUEM.BE, the Belgian umbrella organisation for Supported Employment. Yasmin informed that the PES Network is preparing its 2023/2024 work programme which includes plans to enhance the work on the Toolkit and to involve NGOs more.

Panel discussion on the study's findings and recommendations

After the coffee break Laura opened the panel discussion on the study. The panellists were Monika Chaba (European Commission) and partners from the Inclusive Labour Market Alliance (ILMA) Alvaro Couceiro (EDF), Fabrizio de Angelis (EASPD), and Mario Verzele (EUSE).

Q1: Was there something from the presentation or the draft document that stood out to you?

Alvaro: he appreciated the holistic approach of the study and its strong link to the main priorities in employment. He regarded early intervention as a key element to increase the chances to stay in the labour market. The definitions of all the different employment models with the key features are also very handy. He believed the publication will provide new ideas and collaborations.

Fabrizio: the document is comprehensive and easy to use. He said that disability is such a wide spectrum that it's difficult to tackle unemployment only by applying policies, and that raising awareness is crucial for these policies to be effective, as they can help to change the mindset.

Monika: she appreciated the fact that EPR has undertaken this research at the same time the Commission was working on the Package. She agreed with Fabrizio about the need to change the mindset through awareness raising. This applies not only to employers and society, but also to people with disabilities themselves, as some of them still have low expectations and don't feel that they can contribute to the labour market.

Mario: taking into consideration different target groups is a good starting point, but then the publication should consider the different types of information needed by them. He stressed the importance of a human rights-based model. EUSE tends to focus on work but it's important to have a network of partners to refer people who need support in other life domains. Laura commented that collaboration is key to ensure that people have access to continuous support.

Q2: Do you think there is any point missing in the publication?

Alvaro: it's always difficult to gather all information in just one study, but this research is a good mapping exercise. He observed that it could be updated when the Commission finishes its study on quality sheltered employment, or with data on real transition rates to the open labour market. An aspect that could get more attention is the activation of inactive people with disabilities, since there is a high proportion of people with disabilities who are not active and therefore not even counted in employment. Lastly, communication among key actors is key to close gaps and exchange knowledge. Laura mentioned that GTB has programmes for long-term unemployed which could be added to the study.

Fabrizio: he felt that public procurement, in the context of reserved markets for organisations employing people with a disability, should be included, especially now that there is a debate on social economy, which is crucial to improve the rate of employment of people with disabilities. Laura replied that it could be incorporated into the section on WISEs, with a reference to public authorities that can reserve contracts to organisations employing people with disabilities.

Mario: he would like to see more content on clear thinking development, especially in terms of support to employers, and practices on self-employment, which can also be an outcome of job orientation. Service providers should actively support people who want to be self-employed. It would also be interesting to look if new ways of organising work, for example micro-jobs, are available to people with disabilities. Transitions need to be highlighted more (from school to work, work-to-work, work and care, work and lifelong learning). Laura said that the section on entrepreneurship can be expanded and include self-employment and the section on job creation can include some information on micro jobs.

Monika: it could be useful to underscore more the integrated approach encompassing social services, as they are important for activation and access to the labour market, but also for career progression. Community-based services are also important to ensure that the person is truly independent. She also suggested to make the role of providers clear when talking about SE and different.

Q3: What would you say are the main implication for service providers of the UN CRPD General Comment on Art. 27?

Mario: the Comment emphasises the use of incentives, but there is the need to make sure that they are truly inclusive and are used as a means and not as a goal. If their effect is not strong enough to convince employers to hire people with disabilities when they are too low, then it means that employers hire them for the financial aid, while they should do it because they have good capabilities. He added that service providers should "go out of their offices" to reach people in need for support.

Fabrizio: the wording of the document is clear and strict when it comes to sheltered employment, but if sheltered workshops are phased out it will be necessary to find solutions also for those who won't be able to access the mainstream labour market. He made the example of a centre he visited in Malta which trains people with disabilities for a limited period of time before moving them to the open labour market, managing to place more than 300 people with disabilities annually (according to their figures). He wondered what will happen if centres like this one are phased out. Laura commented that another topic of debate regards social enterprises, when they fall into the category of sheltered employment and when not.

Alvaro: the General Comment has clarified some concepts but at the same time it has opened new questions, e.g. the meaning of segregated employment. He mentioned equal remuneration and minimum wages, stressing the need to start considering persons with disabilities as real employees. Laura commented that the publication will include good practice on WISEs with a good record of transition to the open labour market, perhaps adding information about the Maltese example as well.

Monika: the Commission is in the process of reading the Comment, but it is aware of the lack of understanding and definition of sheltered employment. One of the deliverable of the Package will be the study in this area, including the different organisational forms and how these employment schemes implement (or not) the UN CRPD requirements. The study will map the EU context, with some country cases for more in-depth examples, and will provide further recommendations.

Laura asked Monika how EPR can connect best to the work on the Package and on which specific initiatives. Monika replied that this event was a first step, especially for further cooperation with the PES Unit, and that she will see whether EPR can be invited to one of the next meetings of the Disability Platform to present the study. The most important thing is to stay in touch to keep updated on what the other part is doing and to find out how to best feed into the deliverables. Monika added that the Package is meant to be a living document to keep the guidance updated and adjusted.

Q4. Would you like to share any other ongoing initiatives of your organisations?

Alvaro: EDF is working on the implementation of the Disability Package, by disseminating at national level its initiatives, and on its annual Human Rights Report, which this year will be on employment in the EU. Another initiative investigates the current level of digital skills of people with disabilities around Europe and how to link them with market needs. EDF is also working on artificial intelligence, mainly in terms of accessibility and non-discrimination, which are relevant for employment as well, especially in recruitment processes. Laura mentioned that EPR has a working group on digital skills and that it would be interesting to connect on this topic.

Mario: in Flanders there will be a new system of individual social economy with the support of the PES and the Department of Work, where individual long-term support is given to employer and employee. Laura asked how that support differs from financial support that companies already receive. Mario explained that it is well structured: there are a wage subsidy and a work subsidy, and the employer himself can hire and train a coach in his organisation. Large companies can have their internal job coaches, while SMEs can use that money to hire external job coaches to provide intensive support. Moreover, it's the employee who asks for support and not the employer.

Fabrizio: EASPD is carrying out a study on the performance of sheltered workshops with the aim to gather knowledge and new data from its members and help them to comply with the principles of the UN CRPD. The study should be complete by the end of the year.

Comments from participants

Sabina commented that employers' organisations should be involved more and that the debate should focus also on bad practices, which can show how discrimination is a daily challenge and could better motivate employers. Laura informed that EPR is planning with ILMA an event with employers for next year focused on reasonable accommodation and raising awareness, and she reflected on whether the publication can show what good and bad practices look like, as sometimes employers don't know what goes against the human-rights model.

Anne Marie observed that sometimes employers are more willing to listen to other employers. Some of them collaborate with Rehab and reported that hiring people with disabilities has improved their general practices. Therefore there is a need to focus on the rights-based approach but also to conceive the hiring of people with disabilities as a business case for the employer that can bring a financial return. Laura observed that trying to get employers to join the meetings is also a challenge, especially when they are not in the network yet, but EPR will further discuss it next year.

Group discussion

Participants in person were divided into two groups and a breakout room was created online to discuss how to improve the document and make it relevant for employers and providers, as well as what EPR should focus on over the next years. The main suggestions included:

- Splitting the publication into different formats, one for employers and one for service providers (or at least dividing the conclusions according to different stakeholders). In the format for employers it's important to look at the best ways to reach them (e.g. roadmap style, more figures on return on investment). Laura commented that originally the document was meant to focus on policies, but then EPR explored ways to make it relevant at least for service providers. Something more is needed to make it useful for employers and EPR has already planned to work on a toolkit on partnerships with employers next year, so it could find a way to use the information already gathered in this publication for a different format and incorporate case studies on reintegration into workforce, reasonable accommodation and return to work with chronic illnesses;
- Defining more clearly sheltered employment vis-à-vis WISEs;
- Highlighting the value of early intervention to employers;
- Increasing efforts to reach out to those not participating in vocational rehabilitation or inactive.

Closing words

Laura invited Sabina to share some final reflections. Sabina thanked Laura and the EPR team for their work on the publication and the organisation of the event, stressing their good timing with the launch of the Employment Package. She remarked on the importance of including all the key stakeholders in the mapping exercise and of working in networks, keeping always in mind the UN CRPD, the human-rights based approach and the relevance of changing the mindset of all actors in the field. It's also important to continue working on identifying best practices, especially when it comes to including people who are very far from the labour market. Lastly, she highlighted how the power of sharing and the cooperation in networks are EPR's mission and an added value for its members.

Laura also thanked participants for taking part in the seminar and sharing their inputs.

Evaluation

The seminar received an overall score of 4.5. Participants were particularly satisfied with the time and format given to the event and the knowledge they gained about challenges, programmes and practices on the transition of people with disabilities in the open labour market (both with a score of 4.6). Also the program and the hybrid format of the event met their expectations (4.4. for both).



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