

EPR Stakeholder Committee - EMPLOYMENT

27 -28 November 2017

BFW, Martinsweg 11, 50999 Köln (Germany)

Promoting cooperation between employers and VR providers benefits all:
from the right to work to the business case

REPORT

The study visit 27.11.2017

In order to give a better overview of the activities of the Berufsförderungswerk (BFW) in Köln, the local host organised a short study visit of the facilities the day before the start of the benchmarking event. Herbert Reitinger guided the participants in some of the key areas of the BFW where learners attend classes and do physical exercises. One of the teachers, presented the features of their programme that promote the



employment of people with mental health conditions and physical disabilities. A small minority of youngsters with a migrant background are also attending specific courses at the BFW Köln. The main goal of the courses is to ensure that learners can find a job in the open labour market and therefore classes focus providing skills highly requested on the job market, especially in building/architecture sectors. It is important to note that the BFW follows the guidelines set forth by the Chamber of Commerce and thanks to a network of Alumni (former trainees) and also the support BFW offer upon completion of the

courses, the employment rate of the trainees is above 70%. Furthermore, as Mr Reitinger pointed out, the wealthy economic situation in the region is another factor that helps to explain the high success rate. Before closing the visit, participants had the opportunity to visit the dedicated area for learners to develop their computer/it skills and finally, the health centre, where both BFW Köln staff and trainees come together to do physical exercises, considered an integral component of to promote well-being. The visit was followed by an informal reception where all participants had the chance to get to networking and start exchanging info about their professional expertise.



Mr Frank Gottwald, the CEO of the Berufshilfe (BFH) in Köln, opened this event and welcomed the group of over thirty participants from Greece, Spain, Norway, Slovenia, Estonia, Hungary, Belgium, Lithuania, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal and France. He also presented some of the expectations of this meeting, to learn from each other's experience and how vocational rehabilitation centres can play a more effective role in



bridging between learners' desires to find meaningful jobs and companies' needs to find good employees. After the brief welcome to all EPR members and acknowledging that the importance of the different expertise attendees will bring in, Mirko Miceli gave the floor to Pablo Escorcia, the facilitator who led also last year's event on cooperation with employers held in Paris (see report Paris2016).

Part I: What does/doesn't work

The first exercise attendees were tasked to, was to answer to two questions in two groups and based on own experience in dealing with companies:

Why do partnerships with employers work well?

- Employing pwd creates a more *open-minded culture* and *promotes diversity*
- Companies need employees
- Companies benefit from a more *socially responsible image* with the society
- Govt provides *financial benefits* to companies hiring pwd
- VR centers prepare trainees with *coaching programmes* well
- Pwd are *highly motivated* and make the best out of the chance they have
- Pwd *inspire and motivate other* employees
- Pwd can support the creation of better *team spirit* and *peer-learning*
- More pwd employed ensure *less turnover* of the staff
- in some countries, companies who have pwd get *more points when applying for public tenders*
- Having pwd decrease the absenteeism of co-workers
- Pwd can perform several tasks and this could give the opportunity for more experienced colleagues to focus on those tasks that require more specialised skills (*job-carving*)

Why don't partnerships with employers work at all?

- *Companies fear* pwd cause problems inside the problem
- Pwd are more likely to get ill – more *absenteeism*
- Companies *focus on the disability* rather than abilities of the pwd
- *Companies unable* (lack of time/ lack of trained staff) to deal pwd may cause
- Having pwd in the company will *slow down production* and *more accidents*
- *Lack of time* to train pwd on the job
- *Labour legislation is highly protective* of pwd and it makes almost impossible (or very expensive) to fire pwd once they are hired
- having pwd in the company required a *change of attitude and culture* within the organisation
- *Lack of (accurate) information* on disabilities related-issues



Part 2: Panel with employers



(from left to right: **Nathalie Herrig**, Recruiter, Capita Süd GmbH, **Daniela Müller**, Recruiter adevis Personalkultur GmbH, **Marc Roelofs**, Director, Hotel Begardenhof, **Frank Schorb**, Leiter Competence Center CISCO/Director Bechtle GmbH & Co.KG)

Four representatives of different companies and sectors joined the EPR members in Köln for a specific sessions aimed at collecting their first-hand experience, thought and ideas on employing people with disabilities.

Marc Roelofs: He stressed that his hotel, having 50% of the staff with disabilities is mandatory due to an internal policy decided when the hotel was set up. The hotel does not disclose any information about the staff with customers, who often do not even realise half of the staff has a mental health condition. *Customer satisfaction and a good team* are the most important aspects of his job and he has never experience any particular problem due to the composition of his staff.

Daniela Müller: as former trainee, she is now aware of both sides, jobseeker's perspective and recruiters. In her opinion, *open communication and honesty* are crucial when looking for a job and from both sides. Jobseekers should be transparent about any needs they might have and employers should be clear about what they are looking for. Specific arrangements to accommodate either need are always possible and can only be done if there is trust and understanding from both parties.

Nathalie Herrig: the company she works in (a call center) is planning to increase its staff from next year, including pwd. She agrees that the workspace will need to adapt to the needs of the pwd but this is not a barrier. In her experience, Nathalia has found *strongly motivated* candidates with disabilities that perform well in the company.

Frank Schorb: the IT company he is working for is experiencing a period of steady growth and they are constantly in need of new employees. The company receives many job applications but what he often noticed is the somewhat lack of motivation and commitment. He pointed out that they welcome pwd because they are highly motivated and the BFW Köln is sending highly motivated candidates with the required basic skills. When entering the company, they have created ad hoc programmes where all new comers acquire more specific skills needed to perform the job in the company.

After the presentation from the employers' panel, participants asked some questions:

1) advertisement: attendees asked whether companies look specifically for pwd when publishing a vacancy or what other channels are most used.

The panellists explained that by German law, vacancies cannot be only being tailored to pwd but they can include a specific reference like "*candidates with disabilities are strongly encouraged to apply*". On top that, the good collaboration and trust with VR centers is important to find jobseekers with disabilities.

2) pros in hiring pwd: employers replied that they feel that is important to give equal opportunities to all, including pwd. They also feel that having pwd will bring a more open-minded attitude among employees which could also important to eliminate stigma and discrimination among colleagues. Financial benefits are also available.



This event has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). For further information please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/easi>

3) Financial benefits: few participants were interested in understanding what the financial benefits to hire pwd in Germany are so they have asked the employers to elaborate more on this point. Some of the benefits mentioned are:

- Development funds to companies provided by the Labour Agency
- internship costs are covered by the State
- Receiving lump sum (up to € 20.000/employee) for workplace accommodation from the Employment Assoc.
- Salaries of pwd are partially subsidized – including when on a sick leave

Based on her experience of working with German companies, one participants mentioned that the highly protective German labour law (for permanent contracts) for pwd makes it also an entry barrier to hire them because companies might be afraid they cannot fire pwd. However, the employers explained that the German labour law is protective regardless the disabilities and it works with a “warning system”. This means that before firing anyone the employer should file at least 2 cases of misconduct/unsatisfactory performance, which should be verified by the competent authorities.



The facilitator asked participants to work in groups to identify the main findings of the session with employers. After discussing with each group, participants were asked to write down the conclusion and write the key points emerged trying to address three different questions:

Interest in hiring pwd	Benefits & Challenges	What do employers expect from VR providers?
Social Responsibility Giving a chance Getting highly motivated employees Financial support	+ Financial support for companies + highly motivated people - to find the right people - skills/competences	To be honest Qualifications Internship Identification of talents To be a contact point they can always refer to

Considering that in some countries there is no quota system (minimum % of pwd must be working in company), the participant from Norway would like to understand how the **quota impacts** the employers’ involvement and what are the perceived incentives in doing that. Based on the experience of other countries where the quota system applies, it seems that the employers might felt forced to do that at the beginning but afterwards they are more inclined to hire pwd (and in some case go above the minimum quota required).

Part 3: Employing pwd: Believers/ non-believers open debate

After the employers’ panel, the facilitator asked participants to reflect on the key issues that emerged and creating an open dialogue between two groups: the believers and non-believers. The main goal was to have a discussion which would take into account employers’ perspectives and also participants’ experience in working with companies.

Believers

There are differences between the two sectors, but all have the moral/social mission to create inclusive employment

Depending on the country, there is always assistance to support the employment of pwd. Good planning and collaboration are necessary to find opportunities and resources

Non-believers

There is a difference between public-private sector

“Time is money” and in the private sector there is no time to test/ mentor

Some countries struggle more than others in terms of resources.



Companies are looking for specific skills. VR should be better equipped and receptive in aligning programmes to job-market.

VR have to be more receptive of companies' needs but also pwd's needs

By better collaboration between companies, VR centres and pwd, all needs can be better addressed

When talking about disability, we have to keep in mind that there are different needs at stake and not only the company's / market-related issues

MH conditions should be dealt with separately

Before closing the debate, the facilitator pointed out that the outcomes of this exercise are valid for anyone and should be inspire participants in improving their services. *VR providers cannot force companies to change, but VR can change the way they approach companies.*

Furthermore, one participant noted that an important clarification should be made when talking about disability and employment: there is a need of more *inclusive organisation culture* but also the need of *workplace accommodation*, which may require structural investment from the company.

Part 4: VR sharing practices and ideas

In this session, participants were invited to share examples and practices which they use to work with companies in their own country (for further details of some practices, PPT presentations are available as Annexes – not in the text here).

The local host opened this session presenting two practices:

BFW 1: “go2job programme” for people aged 45+ with health problems. Based on the skills they have acquired in previous work experiences, the programme is tailored to each participant and aims at developing specific skills to further improve the employability of each participant (see Power Point presentation: A. *go2job*).

BFW 2: MitArbeit! In Köln, in collaboration with Job Center/Employment Agency and two further local providers. This is a pilot project focusing on long-term unemployed with severe disabilities based on individual coaching (see Power Point presentation: B. *MitArbeit!*)

HELIOMARE (NL) – They organise a yearly event where they invite employers. They use the job-carving model, so to create opportunities for pwd reallocating tasks of the current workflow.

ASTANGU (EE) – they work a lot with schools and also organise events to connect with employers - Töölaad (see Power Point presentation: C. *Astangu*)

INSERTA (ES) – They have extensive experience in supporting jobseekers with disabilities in finding meaningful opportunities. They have developed a collaboration with ROCHE, creating a volunteer programme divided in 4 different stages. The volunteer familiarizes with CV/ interview process, expending IT skills and then followed by a tutor. The last stage includes on the job-training (only few days). (see Power Point presentation: D. *Inserta*).

THEOTOKOS (GR) – due to the independent funding structure (private donations), they are able to develop activities that are focussing on supported employment and provide on-going assistance to both companies and job-seekers with disabilities. Thanks to the never-ending support, Theotokos has built trust with companies and a strong national network of employers they work with.

URI (SLO) – they have extensive experience in supporting pwd in finding a job creating on-the-job training and using multidisciplinary teams (see Power Point presentation: E. *URI*). In their professional experience, however,



they fear that pwd do not always get the right support in the company and that legislative changes might improve the employability of pwd in Slovenia.

EPNAK (FR) – a new BUS project will be soon operating in the region close to Evry. The main idea is to use this bus to reach out jobseekers with disabilities in rural areas, to better understand their needs and request (see Power Point presentation: F. *Epnak-Soisy*).

ADELANTE (NL): when focusing on return to work, they work using the guidelines issued at the national level by the Knowledge Centers to Labour Adaptation. It is important that for each person they develop the “inventory of barriers” (listing all possible obstacles that person will face when returning to work) to create a realistic path to fully reintegrate into the company. They also assess whether it is possible to return to the previous job, a new position or in some cases, possibility to work in a new company.

GTB (BE): (afternoon) GTB in partnership with the Flemish Agency VDAB developed an initiative where trainees can experience the job-environment for one day. The initiative has been so far very successful in developing and maintain partnership with several companies and other organisations in Europe are invited to launch the DuoDay in their own country (see Power Point presentation: G. *GTB + Manual_DuoDay* and [website](#)).

NHO (NO): (afternoon presentation) NHO is a network of over hundred companies. In order to promote the employability of pwd, they go into each organisation to better understand what their needs are and then connect the VR – the project is called “Ripples in the water” (see [additional info](#)). Based on their experience, the main goal is to create relationships that are confidential, trustworthy and amenable. The companies’ needs assessment is followed up by the so-called Key Account Manager. Marketing skills are not compulsory but highly desirable to perform well in this position.

Part 5: Introduction to the ProAbility project findings

Andrea Toarniczky, from the Corvinus University, shared with the participants the key findings of the proAbility project, carried out in Hungary and based on the Norwegian experience in cooperating with companies. Following her presentation at the EPR 2017 Annual Conference, where the workshop was well received by the participants, the idea was to further explain some features of the proAbility project in Koln, within an event focussing on promoting employment opportunities for pwd.

Based on the findings of the project, Andrea stressed that in order to reach out to companies, HR managers’ engagement, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and raising-awareness activities are crucial. Furthermore, the **CEO’s emotional commitment** plays an important role in creating trust and therefore collaboration with employers.

In terms of successful strategies:

- for CEOs: business case and business language have proved particularly important to bolster commitment
- for HR Managers: are best persuaded to hire pwd when a systematic approach is presented, including successful cases of good collaboration.
- finding your HERO: regardless of the position, Andrea stressed the importance of finding a “Hero” within each company. This person will act as catalyst for change and ensure and promote relevant actions with the companies.

Additionally, she presented some of the training module developed in the project and how they can be applied in real cases, mentioning also that the University is looking into the possibility of including part of the materials in parts of business programmes (see Power Point presentation: H. *proAbility*).



Part 6: How can we connect the dots?

Before moving to the trainees' perspectives session, the facilitator invited attendees to discuss in groups and share what were the great/inspiring ideas emerged during the previous sessions.

- Focus on employers' needs
- Focus on finding jobs first (on-job training linked to specific needs of the company)
- DuoDay initiative to create links with companies (job-shadowing in general)
- VR to provide long-term support to companies
- Importance of meeting between companies and jobseekers
- Itinerant bus to inform pwd in rural areas about jobs for pwd (maybe a bus for companies too)
- Training for employers to hire pwd
- Get the emotional engagement of employers
- Promoting inclusive culture in the workplace
- Normalization of disability in the workplace
- Speak the "business" language to employers
- Invite employers to ad hoc events promoting inclusion of pwd

Part 7: the trainees' perspectives

In order to have insights from all stakeholders, two trainees of the BFW Köln were invited to share their stories and the influence of attending a course at the BFW has impacted their life.

Trainee1: after a period of illness, BFW has helped her in finding a balance and perspective to deal with her future. By creating a "safe area", she better understood what she is capable of and what she might need help with. Thanks to very qualified and professional team, she has been able to overcome any illness-related issue and move forward. She acquired a better self-confidence about her capacities, not only skills and knowledge. She had a very positive experience at the BFW Köln and through the traineeship she learnt how to become herself again.

Trainee2: Despite being a successful trainee, with many interests and ideas, she is still struggling to find a job. BFW provides a lot of support but it is not helping her at the moment. In her experience, she was invited for further interviews but for not really fulfilling jobs. This trainee also shared her frustration for the lack of feedback received by companies when she was not selected. Despite her strong motivation to get a job, it is currently very hard for her to find one.

Participants from other VR centers acknowledged that finding a job is not always easy and it might take some time before finding the right one. BFW reassured that they are doing their best to find a good position for her and that, despite the unsuccessful attempts so far, they are sure one day she will find a job.

Based on these different testimonies, the facilitator asked the participants if it was important to hear directly from the trainees. All participants agreed that it is crucial to have their feedback when developing services, stressing that VR's main goal is to serve clients. Most participants experience similar situations in their daily professional life too. They all have an urge to help and some of them mentioned few ideas on how to support trainees in finding a job:

- "Role-model" former jobseekers could be invited to share their experiences and how they managed to get a job with current trainees/ jobseekers
- "Integration Manager": this profile plays an important role in coordinating efforts to find a suitable position

In the open discussion with the group after the trainees' session, other ideas emerged to promote pwd's opportunities to work:

- A. Use success stories to make the opportunities of hiring pwd visible to employers
- B. Committed employers to act as "Ambassador" to convince other companies to hire pwd
- C. Reach out employers (including social-media) to create interest in hiring pwd
- D. Offering in-company training to better meet the specific needs of the company
- E. Achieve a culture where the question is "Why don't you hire pwd?" rather than "Why do you hire pwd?"
- F. Clarity on expectations for the job is crucial - sometimes needs are mixed for both companies/trainees



Part 8: How can we apply what we have learnt to improve current partnerships?

In summarising the wealth of information shared during the day and based on the facilitator's knowledge of disrupting systems to promote innovation in the social sector, he invited participants to reflect on the following questions:

- *Is the idea of this meeting to improve doing what we do at the moment?*
- *Is there anything that we have learnt today that could lead us to a more radical change, a disruption of the system we are used to?*

Despite the fact that developing new approaches to overcome the current problems is not easy, the facilitator stressed that this could lead to new ideas and possibly to systemic change. VR are playing a middle-man role between jobseekers and companies and in order to thrive in the future, participants proposed some areas that EPR could further explore to promote the employment of pwd:

- ✓ The personal/emotional engagement of higher ranks of the companies to bring about real commitment
- ✓ Findings ways to engage companies as a whole (both CEOs and employees at the same time)
- ✓ Start with those companies / employers who have a personal experience with disability to create more commitment from others
- ✓ Solutions leading to a "normalisation" of disability
- ✓ Promote marketing skills for those profiles in VR in charge of liaising with companies
- ✓ Re-think the VR/companies roles: employers to come to VR (not the other way around)
- ✓ The focus should be put on what pwd can do – their abilities, skills and motivation
- ✓ Pwd to be become ambassadors to share their stories
- ✓ Creating a disability-friendly label for companies
- ✓ Importance of inviting employers to events and creating more and more interest
- ✓ Emphasis on the "first place them and then train them" approach (supported employment)
- ✓ Talk "business" with companies

Part 9: The work ahead

In the closing session, Mirko Miceli presented the European Pillar of Social Rights, including its structure and pointing out the main principles that relate to the employment of pwd (1, 3, 4, 17 - see Power Point presentation: I. EPR). The aim of this short presentation was to link the work each organisation is carrying out to the broader work of the European institutions. Furthermore, Mirko mentioned that principles are not binding but they will influence national policies, stressing that EPR through its work but also by collaborating with Social Service Europe and the Social Platform (two umbrella organisations EPR is member of) can ensure that service providers' needs and feedback are taken into account at the EU level.

Before thanking all participants for their engagement and active participation, Mirko shared some personal takeaways from this benchlearning event, including the reflection on the trainees' motivation, importance of self-confidence, ways to approach companies and role of the VR for trainees. EPR will launch a Working Group on employment open to all EPR members and many of the findings and areas of interest emerged in Köln (see List in Part 8) will be further explored and taken into account to develop activities and projects in 2018 and beyond.

Those interested in the EPR activities related to the Employment of pwd can contact **Mirko Miceli** at mmiceli@epr.eu for further information.

