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UEMPLOY: ONLINE CONSULTANCY FOR EMPLOYMENT INCLUSION

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Abstract: *The research analyses innovative online education methods to address to specific target groups: a) training business consultants to advise companies how to deal professionally with recruiting or retaining disabled employees, within a framework of equal opportunities best practice; b) training company human resource management (HRM) departments in effective employment practices for disabled workers and in evaluating the change management processes needed for success in this process; c) demonstrating to company management how proactive equal opportunities practices in personnel selection can enhance quality of services and products offered, increase profitability and reduce risk of complaints and discrimination. The innovative training modules address strategic planning, investment in personnel and a modern vision of enterprise development that reflects advanced levels of corporate social responsibility. The project supporting implementation of this research and training is a two-year Leonardo Da Vinci project, UEmploy (510784-LLP-1-2010-1-RO-LEONARDO-LMP) with 7 partners from BG, HU, FI, IE and RO.*

This project underlines that while European employment inclusion is an important objective, there is no common standardized scheme. The online component of the training contributes to standardization of approaches and contents. The focus of the project is modern rehabilitation, a range of services and processes designed to enable all disabled people to live their lives as fully as possible. For organizations, SMEs and professionals the project provides an opportunity to introduce/train innovative employment inclusion and rehabilitation approaches in dealing with people with disabilities throughout all work processes. Methods and professional support (in English and partner languages) facilitates SMEs to employ people with disabilities. Handbooks and materials for company management and HR departments have already been developed and tested in each partner country. Social partners have validated materials and a blended learning system is in place for all the categories of beneficiaries. The project addresses employer representatives: organizations, SMEs and professionals. UEmploy provides training opportunities for innovative employment inclusion and rehabilitation supports. UEmploy addresses employment inclusion from the perspectives of both employees and employers, facilitating access and cooperation. Many European countries still have very low employment rates for disabled citizens, despite some EU policy success over the past decade. People with disabilities are still significantly excluded from work activities, which could provide financial support, employment integration and continuing professional development. However, companies increasingly realize that inclusive employment produces significant added value. Added skills and competence is linked to inclusion strategies. Employers benefit from enhanced design, creative access and real added value in developing proactive learning strategies in access and services.

Keywords: *employment inclusion, disabled people, SMEs, consultancy*

I. INTRODUCTION

The UEmploy project addresses the needs of both individual professionals (who are involved in the preparation, training and support of people with disabilities in their journey towards labor market integration) and agencies (who will receive input, support and best practice methodologies on

how to select and integrate disabled employees in their work environments). Modern quality-driven rehabilitation, services and processes, designed to enable disabled people to maximize their life experiences, are all on the agenda of the project.

For many years, European approaches to labor market integration of people with disabilities have been characterized by a high degree of fragmentation as well as the inherited traditions in which most rehabilitative interventions were situated: medical, institutional, psychological, welfare or charitable. Moving towards a more focused professional approach means adapting to evidence best practice, rights based models and pro-active economic benefit models where engineering, design and adaptability become valued by-products of the integration process.

There are several developmental and implementation stages within the UEmploy project:

1. **Research and contextualization** – in this stage the project partnership researched the different national contexts of their respective countries to determine the actually existing conditions and employment status for disabled people. Using specially designed tools, the project team has collected and analyzed information that was then compiled into national reports. The five national reports have been further developed through comparative analysis by the representatives of the international project team and compiled in one European Report. This report reflects European policy, practice and existing realities for disabled citizens in accessing employment
2. **Materials development** – using the research findings and report materials, the project team has then developed training materials for consultancy in the field of disability-specific employment. Materials developed in the project, and which form the core of the training, include: competency checklist, competency toolkit, the training kit and other complementary materials developed later on within this present report. These materials reflect best practice in disability pro-active adaptation.
3. **Training organization and implementation** – using the materials developed earlier in the project, national training programs have been organized in each project country, with the help and support of an international expert present at all training session. This resulted in the design and delivery of a training program for a team of EU consultants, specialized in employment inclusion. Additionally, representatives from each country were trained as scheme managers at international level to support the employment consultants.
4. **Fieldwork** – all professionals trained in the project are engaged in a process of auditing a number of volunteer companies at national level. Scheme managers will directly coordinate this process. Results will be centralized at the level of the partnership. Final training materials, validated after the auditing process, are being made available online, in all project languages. This will build into the project's sustainability and transferability.

II. OBJECTIVES AND APPROACH

The project aims to facilitate and support cooperation between companies, agencies and organizations that provide consultancy on advanced employment inclusion and integration throughout Europe. This is done by raising employers' awareness on the needs and capacity of people with disabilities. It is also achieved by providing policy updates and organizational adaptations relevant to the employment of disabled workers. This is designed to ensure a suitable and inclusive work environment that supports personal and professional development with shared benefit for employer and employee alike.

The overall objective of the project is to develop and improve support system quality so as to ensure equal employment opportunities for disabled workers and to promote this as an integral element in both employment policy and community development strategies. UEmploy aims to encourage companies to employ disabled people by informing decision makers at higher organizational and decision-making levels about the modernizations necessary to provide disabled employees with adaptable and inclusive work environments. For disabled workers, this develops higher levels of motivation and self-confidence and also a more active social and professional life. For employers it enhances innovation, develops universal design methods and addresses issues such as work absence, return to work methodologies and improved productivity.

By making UEmploy project deliverables available online in all project languages, the project will ensure the sustainability and transferability of the training materials developed. It will provide future potential beneficiaries with training opportunities and, therefore, other SMEs and institutions with input and support from the consultancy network that has been created. UEmploy aims to implement a holistic approach to the professional vocational and social inclusion of disabled employees. Activities set out within the project implementation plan have all been ordered in a logical sequence. They present a complex yet coherent set of processes accompanied by dedicated implementation tools. The major aim of the project is to support the inclusion of disabled employees through their social and professional integration in the workplace. In order to achieve this objective, the project approaches tasks from different angles corresponding to the different actors, needs and dimensions of effective workplace inclusion for those with disabilities.

First of all, the project team investigated issues around work inclusion for those with disabilities to identify patterns, issues and conditions in the various partner project countries. This allowed the project team to implement activities from a verifiable, researched and realistic starting point. Through questionnaires and comparative research, national project teams were able to construct an accurate image of the current labor market situation of disabled employees. They also isolated opportunities and blockages in employment opportunities for disabled citizens. They compiled this information in national and international reports, designed to guide development of subsequent project activities. These reports underlined those aspects essential for partner focus in building positively in to the main project objectives. At this stage the principle collaborators were agencies and employer representatives who answered questionnaires on their receptiveness to employment of disabled workers or their interest in future interest in engagement with disability in the workforce.

The research stage was followed by development of support materials for the training programs and preparatory sessions. This included contributions of training experts and inputs from the entire project team. Materials developed for consultants' training were piloted and improved according to feedback received. All project activities, simultaneously implemented within all project countries, have been developed on the basis of a common implementation framework that ensures a standardized process. It also contributes to coherence and cohesion of the overall project impact.

III. OUTCOMES AND RESULTS

In order to support and facilitate more effective employment outcomes for disabled people, the UEmploy project has developed a complex set of instruments and materials starting with comprehensive research studies, gradually building towards professional training materials, training provision and field applications of project deliverables. This has been done both at national levels and through international best practice transfer.

One of the first steps in project implementation was national research, developed by each national partner. Research outcomes were the basis for training and training materials development. In order to implement relevant and accurate research processes, the international project team developed research techniques and tools (surveys, questionnaires and research plan). Outcomes were benchmarked against international best practice to produce cutting-edge analysis.

The training materials were developed based on the international report findings (which also summarized national research findings in each project country). Training materials included tools for beneficiaries' selection, input contents, comparative study resources materials as well as evaluation materials and tools. These materials have been piloted in national training sessions. They are to be improved on the basis of the feedback received from the selected training beneficiaries. The final interactive form of these materials is being prepared to be available online in all the project languages by the end of the project.

The digitalization process is made up of several stages including a consultancy process and analysis which provides useful feedback about the materials developed and the processes used for the face-to-face experts' training and the scheme managers' training – this allows for the close monitoring that any suggested change to the documentation may entail for effective implementation. The online

tool is forming a training tool for prospective consultants. It has been found out that the face-to-face materials needed some restructuring and the whole training approach and its phasing should be planned in the online format so as to give a complete understanding of the process as well as the supporting documentation. Feedback has also shown that the tools used in the face-to-face training needed a better definition of the steps of the process and accompanying types of instruments and documents which would need to be used during each step. The need for clear methodological online guidelines (as to how each document should be used, when and by whom) was also voiced in the feedback process.

Training delivery within the UEmploy project has been planned and implemented at both national and international levels. Beneficiaries have been carefully selected for the first stage of training (national face-to-face training). Then a representative from each national team was selected to participate in the international scheme managers' training. Scheme managers coordinate auditing work of the national beneficiaries' team. They will therefore facilitate and support development of the national networking system. Henceforth the online training materials are of vital importance for the continuous monitoring of the process. Moreover the scheme managers collaborate online with the project team.

Within the second part of the national training programs, each beneficiary develops an audit based on the input they received within the first part of the training. Trainees monitor and analyze the organizational context and background of participating organizations. They assess the orientation these institutions have towards employing disabled people. They also make suggestions for cost-effective and pro-active employment strategies for disabled workers. Participants have thus the opportunity to put into practice the competences developed in the first part of the training. Each national partner develops 5 such audits, which are supervised by the national scheme manager and wider project team. The final form of the audit will be sent to the participating agencies and employers. Feedback from these will be provided to the project team and the trainees.

The online presence of the project is related both to project visibility as well as the functionality of the communication system among scheme managers and all other parties involved in project. It also ensures that the processes and approaches are standardized and that if clarifications are needed the online training materials can arbitrate the correct answers to methodologies and documentation. The project website can be accessed at www.uemploy.eu

The project team is presently working on developing the networking system for scheme managers and all the other consultants trained in the project and on the digitalization of the training materials and documents. This will act as a communication and support channel for sharing and evaluating best practice.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the modern experience of disability and associated rehabilitation interventions, an orientation to vocational training and employment has been central. At the core of efforts, in all countries, to secure equal rights and social inclusion of people with disabilities has been some form of concentration on work as both a means and an end. This focus on work stems from attitudes, rooted profoundly in historical belief and practice. Some of these attitudes were essentially charitable. Other perspectives viewed work as restorative or compensatory for those (particularly war-wounded veterans) who had acquired disabilities. The powerful resonance of exclusion linked to the experience of disability has coloured many social approaches and policies, not least of which is access to the labour market.

In the medicalized context of disability (and associated specialized rehabilitation programs) work has been linked to both therapeutic enhancement and the restoration of optimal level of functioning. In the welfare and social security context of disability, work has been seen as the most effective mechanism to restore individuals to productive levels of functioning and to reduce costs to the state. In charitable models of disability, work has been viewed as a path to meaningful activity and

providing some form of day care or occupational therapy for those deemed unable to participate more effectively in society.

For those with disabilities, particularly in the context of the significant advances of the Independent Living movement and civil rights focus, these traditional models of work have been seen as problematic. At best, they have been viewed as patronizing. At worst, these models are regarded as diminishing the abilities, capacities and potential of those with disabilities to participate as gainfully employed citizens in their own right.

Work is central to the dignity, self-confidence and social meaning of individuals. Work gives people a valued identity and a sense of sociological belonging. Work validates the activities and standing of individuals with relation to their lived experiences and in their relationships with others in the community. It is no accident therefore that services and interventions for people with disabilities have historically concentrated on vocational aspects. Making the transition from dependence and institutionalization to independence and contributory citizenship has almost universally been viewed as centering on a vocational approach. In this, skills acquisition and securing employment are effective paths to a valued existence.

The changes that have swept the world of disability and professional rehabilitation in recent decades have also drawn explicitly on models of civil rights and legal redress for discrimination experienced. This process, by no means completed, has re-appropriated work and employment as a measure of inclusion rather than as a mechanism to secure recovery. In this dynamic, disability has reasserted its right to redefine work in terms of what benefits it can bring to those with disabilities rather than as an externally determined construct into which people must be obliged to fit.

The right to work and to participate in meaningful economic activity is one of the fundamental issues for the community of people with disabilities internationally. In the long history of social interventions around disability (and the specific contributions of vocational rehabilitation perspectives and techniques) the ability to work and contribute to society has been viewed as central to the assertion of other civic rights. This process is based on the fact that improvements in ability to work and to live independently bring about parallel enhancements in other areas of an individual's life.

From the outset work has been tied into other considerations. As early as 1935, Henry Kessler observed that the advances offered through medical and vocational rehabilitation could not be truly effective if the legal and social restrictions faced by people with disabilities were not addressed.

In addition to the assumed individual benefits of participation in the labor market, significant social benefits and public service impact issues have been identified. These have included: reduced social welfare expenditure, more effective return on public investment, increased productivity in an expanded workforce, reduced burden on health services and improved participation rates for individuals.

The early advances in vocational rehabilitation and employment development for people with disabilities were largely driven by two elements. First were the needs of veterans of twentieth century wars. Second was legislation (largely originating in the United States) that, for the first time, provided resources, research and professional methodologies to develop work options for those with disabilities.

The agitation of disability consumer groups influenced the passage of legislation in the United States (specifically the Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990) that, for the first time, provided for linkage between independent living and employment. The development of comprehensive and organic links between independent living and vocational rehabilitation or employment strategies meant that both aspects were seen as integrated parts of an employment-rights and access agenda rather than separate programs.

The compatibility of independent living and employment goals was reinforced by the growing realization that, if advances in medical and rehabilitation technologies were allied to increases in the accessibility of buildings, services and transport systems, then employment outcomes for people with disabilities would become more feasible for larger and larger proportions. After 1970 disability legislation internationally began to emphasize environmental accessibility and provision of independent living services, as well as the increased need for research and evaluation.

Central to the success of linking independent living and employment approaches has been the role and importance of research. Historically, research directed at understanding disability has focused on describing the characteristics of people with disabilities and development of interventions to reduce

disability-related limitations. This functional limitations model has been severely criticized for its inability to provide a sufficient explanation for the poor levels of participation of people with disabilities in society, particularly with regard to employment. The primary research focus now has shifted to investigation of the effect of public attitudes on the design of the environment and on the assumed physical, emotional and intellectual characteristics necessary for full participation in community life and work. Hahn (1987) suggests that attitudinal obstacles produce even greater restrictions on people with disabilities than do physical barriers. He notes that a disabling environment contains both physical and attitudinal barriers and obstacles that infringe the rights of people with disabilities to live a valued life. He commented that

Any research evidence that reveals a deep seated and pervasive antipathy or aversion toward people with disabilities suggests the restrictions imposed by the built environment and social institutions are not simply accidental or coincidental [Hahn 1987, pp 187-88].

This reordering of the research focus regarding disability has a particular importance with regard to barriers to employment. This relates especially to the appropriateness of functional requirements and physical examinations established as preconditions for many types of jobs. Locating the focus of change in the environment rather than in the individual has produced a far more positive orientation of vocational and employment perspectives for those with disabilities. The realization among those with disabilities that they have been limited less by their disabilities than by the effects of inflexible social attitudes and environmental barriers lies at the core of the rights agenda for inclusion.

In addressing employment needs different kinds of both skills and supports may be required, or specific combinations of these. In turn these must be linked to labour market requirements and address employer concerns. In looking at transition to employment, the specialized literature on disability identifies five main factors. These are: job seeking skills training, direct placement interventions, supported employment, job development and employer concerns.

The historic sense of disability as a medical problem meant that people with disabilities were seen as incapable of work. The advent of the independent living movement in the United States shifted the focus of disability away from the individual and toward the environment in which he or she functioned. This new paradigm assumed that people with disabilities can participate in all aspects of life if environmental barriers (e.g. physical, social, policy) are removed, if new assistive technology is made available and if new social arrangements can be designed to accommodate them. The major focus of disability activists and policy makers in the US and European Union is now about reducing barriers to, and creating new accommodations for, the employment of people with disabilities.

The UEmploy project builds strongly on these historic foundations. It sees the experience of disability and the researched best practice tools of vocational rehabilitation as powerful sources of creativity and best practice in developing and standardizing a European system of response to inclusion and integration. At a time of systemic crisis when public resources are severely restricted, it is even more important to discover innovative methods that anticipate future needs rather than merely relying on institutionalized systems of containment. The dynamic and ever-changing workplaces of the future can therefore become strong focal points for best practice and innovation in meeting the needs of diverse Europeans.

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